The Complete

RIVERSIDE

ELLEN KUSHNER

AND DELIA SHERMAN

The Complete
RIVERSIDE
ELLEN KUSHNER
AND DELIA SHERMAN

The Complete Riverside

*

Swordspoint

The Privilege of the Sword

The Fall of the Kings

*

Ellen Kushner
with
Delia Sherman

"The Witch in the Wood" Copyright © 2012 by Delia Sherman
First publication: *Under My Hat*. New York: Random House, (2012)

"The Tragedy of King Alexander the Stag" Copyright © 1999 by Delia Sherman
First publication: *A Distant Soil #29*, ed. Colleen Doran, Image Comics, 1999

"A Wild and a Wicked Youth" Copyright © 2009 by Ellen Kushner
First Publication: *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, April/May 2009

"Red-Cloak" Copyright © 1982 by Ellen Kushner
First publication: Whispers (August 1982)

SWORDSPOINT Copyright © 1987 by Ellen Kushner
First hardcover edition: February 1987
First US hardcover edition: November 1987
First paperback edition: September 1987
First US paperback edition: July 1989

Afterword Copyright © 2003 by Ellen Kushner

"The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death" Copyright © 1991 by Ellen Kushner
First publication: The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (September 1991)

"The Duke of Riverside" Copyright © 20011 by Ellen Kushner
First publication: *Naked City: Tales of New Urban Fantasy*, ed. Ellen Datlow New York: St Martin's, (2011)

THE PRIVILEGE OF THE SWORD Copyright © 2006 by Ellen Kushner
First hardcover edition: August 2006
First paperback edition: August 2006

"The Man with the Knives" Copyright © 2010 by Ellen Kushner
First publication: New York: Temporary Culture, (April 2010)

"The Death of the Duke" Copyright © 1998 by Ellen Kushner
First publication: Starlight 2 (1998)

"Honored Guest" Copyright © 2007 by Ellen Kushner
First publication: *The Coyote Road: Trickster Tales*. Viking, (2007)

THE FALL OF THE KINGS Copyright © 2002 by Ellen Kushner and Delia Sherman
First trade paperback edition: November 2002
First paperback edition: January 2003
All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction.
Names, places, characters and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.
No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of Bantam Books, except where permitted by law.

CONTENTS

THE WITCH IN THE WOOD
DELIA SHERMAN

THE TRAGEDY OF KING ALEXANDER THE STAG
DELIA SHERMAN

A WILD AND A WICKED YOUTH
ELLEN KUSHNER

RED-CLOAK
ELLEN KUSHNER

SWORDSPOINT
ELLEN KUSHNER

THE SWORDSMAN WHOSE NAME WAS NOT DEATH
ELLEN KUSHNER

THE DUKE OF RIVERSIDE
ELLEN KUSHNER

THE PRIVILEGE OF THE SWORD
ELLEN KUSHNER

THE MAN WITH THE KNIVES
ELLEN KUSHNER

THE DEATH OF THE DUKE
ELLEN KUSHNER

HONORED GUEST
ELLEN KUSHNER

THE FALL OF THE KINGS
ELLEN KUSHNER and DELIA SHERMAN

The Witch in the Wood

DELIA SHERMAN

WHEN I FIRST SAW MY TRUE LOVE, he was lying by a brook at the foot of a bog oak. One foot trailed in the water, his eyes were closed, his nostrils flared with his panting, and his branching horns tangled among the roots of the oak. An arrow was buried deep in his haunch, fouling his pelt with blood.

The arrow was mine.

I did not know then that he was my true love. I thought he was a winter cloak, a pair of mittens, meat for my larder, fat for my fire, bones for needles and spoons and buttons and combs. I thought he was an eight-point stag.

I'd been chasing him for some time; the sun, which had been above the mountain when I'd shot him, had sunk into the western valley. In my forest, it was already dusk, but I saw him clearly enough, his tawny coat pale against the dark moss. As I crept nearer, my knife ready to slit his throat, the sky flared crimson as the sun set. The air shivered; I blinked. When I opened my eyes, the deer was a man, his long dark hair braided with twigs and small, polished stones, naked and bleeding, with my arrow in his thigh.

Living in the forest, I was used to transformations. Caterpillars become butterflies, blossoms become berries, tadpoles become frogs with the turning of each season. Deer becoming men, however, was beyond my experience. Before I could recover myself, he had seized the shaft of the arrow and pulled it from his leg with a hiss of pain.

It was a brave thing to do, but not a wise one. Blood welled from the wound in a mortal stream that I knew would soon drain him. I crashed through the undergrowth that separated us and dug my knife into the moss, cutting out a handful to pack into the hole my arrow had made. I pressed against the moss to hold it firm, feeling the prickling in my hands that

would stem the flow. Only when I knew the blood had clotted did I remove my hands and rip the sleeve from my linen shirt to make a bandage.

Neither of us said a word.

Very conscious of his eyes on me, I dug a fire pit and lined it with rocks and wood, then took up a dry stick and told it to burn. As it bloomed into flame, he gasped—the first sound he'd made since drawing my arrow from his thigh.

"Witch," he said.

"No. Mildryth."

He huffed—a very deerlike noise. "I mean, you are a witch."

I wasn't about to admit I didn't know the word. He was a man, after all, and although I'd never actually spoken to a man before, my mother had always told me men respected only those stronger than they. So, "That's as may be," I said.

"I cannot stay here, witch. You must heal me."

I have never liked the word *must*, even when said in a voice as sweet as birdsong. "I *must* do as I think best. I've stopped the bleeding, but the wound has to heal at its own pace. I'd like it best if I could get you under a roof, but here will do until you're fit to walk."

He nodded. "I see. What would you have done with me had I been a deer in truth?"

"I'd have camped here until I could get you cut up properly and made a litter to drag you home." I thought for a moment. "I can still do that."

"Without the cutting up, I hope," he said, and laughed, which made me so angry I did not speak again until the soup was steaming and fragrant.

"It's venison," I said, giving him a pannikin-full. "I hope you don't mind."

He took the pannikin in a blood-streaked hand. "I don't mind."

He ate in silence, and when he was done, I ate what was left in the pot. As the fire burned low, he spoke again, soft-voiced. "When I am a deer, I have a deer's mind. In the morning, I will run from you and open my wound again."

"No, you won't."

"I will harm myself trying to break free if you bind me."

"You won't." I loosed my hair, which fell to my knees, and cut three hairs with my knife. "Look, here is the rope."

He was silent, his eyes fixed on my hand.

One hair I tied around his ankle, one around his wrist, and one among the narrow braids of his own dark hair. His skin was warm and smooth under my fingers, and his hair smelled salt and a little bitter, like wood smoke. Around his throat I saw a thick braided cord, bright crimson, like fresh blood. As I reached to touch it, he gathered my hair into his hands and, lifting it to his face, inhaled deeply.

I retreated hastily. "It's getting cold," I said. "I should build up the fire. And you must sleep."

He buried his head in his arms and was still. But as I sat listening to the noises of the night, I saw the firelight glitter in his watching eyes.

THE BIRDS WERE SINGING WHEN I WOKE, and the mist rose from the brook, pearly in the growing light. The man was still a man, and I watched him sleep, wondering whether I'd dreamed his transformation. The light warmed; the air shivered. Between one breath and the next, the man became a deer lying between the roots of the oak, his legs tucked up under his belly, my shirtsleeve bound around his haunch, and a crimson cord snugged around his neck.

Long lashes lifted, revealing liquid, nervous eyes. Cautiously I stretched out my hand. Cautiously he sniffed my fingers, licked them for the salt, then began to tear at the moss.

We passed a quiet day. I collected branches, bark, and vines, gathered grass and fresh leaves for the deer, shot a rabbit and put it to roast. While I made the litter, the deer nibbled, slept, lapped water from the pannikin, slept again. I wanted to stroke him, but it seemed unfair, when he could not escape.

Sometime during the long afternoon, a horn's mournful lowing broke the forest calm. The deer started awake, floundered, and tried to rise, blowing and panting with terror. Dodging his flailing horns, I laid my hand on his brow.

"You've nothing to fear," I said. "That's further away than it sounds, and bearing to the west besides."

He fell back onto the moss. For a moment I thought he had understood me. But he only mouthed at the leaves again, and I knew he was just a deer.

At sunset I was cutting up the rabbit when a sweet voice said, "Is that rabbit I smell?" startling me nearly out of my skin.

"It is," I said, and gave him half on a dock leaf. "Eat up. We'll have to leave before moonrise to make it home before dawn."

"Home." He sighed. "I can never go home again."

I chewed rabbit and swallowed. "Why not?"

"Politics. Religion. Wizards." He made a face. "You wouldn't understand."

I did not know those words, either, so I concentrated on finishing my portion of rabbit and thinking about how best to bind my awkward catch to the litter. It was not an easy task, he being alive and hurt besides. He called me a clumsy slut and I threatened to leave him to die. When he doubted, aloud, that a mere slip of a girl was strong enough to move him, I heaved the head of the litter up to my back and dragged it over the uneven ground at a fine pace, with him calling curses down upon my head with every bounce.

Before long, the curses trailed off and he began to moan. Repentant, I went more gently after that, but by the time I reached my home glade and my cottage, the bandage around his thigh was stained with fresh blood, and the man himself had fainted.

I made a nest for him by the hearth, stanched the wound, packed it with cobwebs, and bound it anew before he woke.

"If you were trying to kill me, you failed," he murmured.

"If I'd been trying, I would have succeeded. Drink this." He lifted one brow—I hadn't known that was possible. "It's a sleepy drink—valerian and chamomile and licorice root. It will soothe the deer as well as the man."

"Those hunters hunted me," he said. "Sooner or later they must find this place. And a full-grown deer is hard to hide."

"I have an idea about that," I said. "Drink now, and sleep."

WHEN I WAS LITTLE, my mother taught me many things. She taught me how to coax seedlings to grow by the fire in winter, how to knit flesh and bend living wood into rooted chairs and leafy tables. She taught me to call animals to kneel before me and birds to roost on my shoulders. And she taught me not to use my knowledge unless I must, to survive.

I knew she would not have considered the safety of my deer-man a matter of survival—she had a very low opinion of men, with or without horns. But my mother had lain buried under the holly bush beside the door

for three long winters, and I did not want my deer-man to die. So I stood at the edge of the glade and called a true stag to me.

He was an eight-point buck with a tawny coat only a shade darker than my deer-man's. When he knelt before me, I looked into his eyes and cut his throat, catching his blood in a pan. Then I went inside, where my deer-man slept uneasily, and laid hold of the crimson cord around his neck.

It stung me like a nettle.

I glared at the cord, then reached out to test it with that sixth sense that had awoken in me five years ago when first I began to give my blood to the earth. I worked out how the threads were twisted, and when I'd unraveled them, strand by strand, the cord dropped from the stag's neck. He sighed and shifted on his pallet of bracken, then slid deeper into sleep.

While he slept, I skinned the stag I had called, cut him into pieces, and was pinning the heavy hide onto the drying-frame behind the cottage when I heard a commotion of voices and dogs. Hastily I gathered around me an illusion of a woman of middle years, brindle-haired and stern of face, her arms thick with muscle—my mother, in fact, as she'd been before she died—and strode around the house, wiping bloody hands on my deerskin apron.

Twelve men stood in my glade, as alike to my eyes as leaves on a birch tree, tall and supple, their skin darkened by the sun, their hair braided, like my deer-man's, with leaves and feathers and polished stones. Unstrung bows were slung across their shoulders, and long knives thrust through their braided belts. They looked trail-worn and nervous as rabbits.

One of them stepped forward—a pale-haired man, with gold around his arm. "Greetings, good woman. We seek a deer."

I folded my arms to still their shaking. "Then you seek in a good place," I said in my mother's voice. "There are a plenty of deer in these woods. My man killed one yestereve."

The twelve men stiffened, like foxes scenting prey. "Your man, say you?" their spokesman said.

"A hunter, like yourselves. He left me with the butchering. It was a fat buck, with a fine rack of horn. It will serve us well this winter."

"Let us see it."

I shrugged. "The joints are ready for the smokehouse. The hide is pinned to the frame. The head is boiling in the pot."

They exchanged glances. "We will see what is to be seen."

They trailed me to the drying-frame and surveyed the fresh hide with their heads to one side and their mouths screwed to the other. They reeked of fear and confusion, but the spokesman's voice was steady as he asked, "Did you chance to find anything around the stag's neck?"

"I did. A braided crimson cord, as like to that around your waist as one hair is to another. I wondered at such a thing on a wild animal, and told my man, I told him, 'I hope you have not bagged some rich man's pet.'"

The spokesman closed his eyes and sighed. "Bring it to us."

"Wait until I get it."

In his nest, the deer lay white-eyed and quivering. I stroked his soft muzzle and blew into his nostrils, then took up the cord and brought it out to the waiting hunters.

"I hope it will not bring grief to me and mine," I said as the spokesman snatched it from my hand, "seeing as my man killed your deer in ignorance, on common land."

The men muttered and cut their eyes at me, but the spokesman silenced them with a look. "It will bring grief," he told me. "But not to you. The deer escaped his bounds."

I could not read his face, but it seemed to me that his body spoke more of fear than sorrow. Questions crowded my mouth, but I shut my teeth upon them. I wanted the hunters to leave more than I wanted answers.

The spokesman bowed. "Farewell, good woman. I wish you and your man joy of the stag. He should make a kingly feast." And to my great relief, they ran into the wood with their braids bouncing on their backs.

That night, the deer-man was feverish and restless.

"They'll be back," he said when I told him, with pride, what I had done. "He'll know it's a trick. He'll send them to fetch me. He may even come himself."

I laid a cool cloth on his forehead. "Hush now. Those men believed me. How could someone who wasn't even here know what they did not?"

"Oh, he'll know. He knows everything." He gripped my hand, stared into my eyes with mad intensity. "Heal me that I may fly this place, for your own sake if not for mine."

"I'm doing my best," I said tartly. "It's all your own fault, you know. If you'd left the arrow for me to cut out properly, you wouldn't have done so much damage. As for your fever, that's your body fighting against itself."

He gave a bitter laugh. “It is as he said: those marked for death shall die.”

Wounded as he was, I could have shaken him for pure frustration. “Marked for death? I’ve never heard such foolishness. There’s nothing wrong with you that willow bark and cobwebs and time won’t mend.”

He shook his head wearily. “There is no time. Could I but cross the river back into the Land, if I could lie on her earth, drink of her water, eat of her bounty, my wound would be healed. To die in exile, useless and barren, is no more than my just punishment for trying to escape my destiny.”

I knew the river he spoke of. It was only a day’s journey north, wide and rocky, easily fordable. My mother had taken me there after my first blood had come, to show me the boundary of our land. I will never forget how she looked on the flowing waters and on the trees that lay across them, her face as bleak as the rocks we stood on.

“Beyond this river lies the Land that was my home,” she said, “until I fled it for my life. There’s nothing for me there, nor for any daughter of my body, save grief and death, dark magics and blood.”

I had never heard her voice so stern, not even when I had disobeyed her and broken my leg hunting on a moonless night, and did not wish to hear it again. When she required my oath never to cross the river, I gave it to her readily.

And yet, the morning after the huntsmen left my glade found me tramping northward, fully intending to do just what I had sworn not to. My deer-man had grown weaker in the night, his pulse thread-thin in his neck, his skin hot and dry under my hand. I knew I might break my oath to no purpose, to cross the river and come home to find him dead. And yet I knew I must try.

Grief and death; dark magics and blood. I couldn’t help thinking that these would be my lot whatever I did.

Once begun, I moved swiftly from the familiar rolling paths of my forest in the foothills to the steeper tracks of the mountain slopes. That night I camped further from my glade than I’d ever imagined being, lying beneath a blanket of stars that were closer and brighter than I’d ever seen them.

I was up and on my way before dawn, and made such speed that I arrived at the river before the sun had reached the zenith. For a time I stood on the bank, staring at the pines and hollies and ash-pale birches on the far

shore, caught between past and future, my oath to my mother and my duty to my deer-man, fear of what I might meet in that forbidden wood and a burning desire to know what lay there.

When I stepped into the river at last, the water was cold as winter snow. It ran strong between scattered boulders, but never deeper than my waist. Step by step I waded over small round stones that rolled treacherously underfoot. It was as if the far shore withdrew as I approached, so long did I struggle toward it. But once I passed the halfway point, the footing grew easier, and at last I floundered panting onto the shore of my deer-man's precious Land.

I looked around me. Was the sky bluer, the birdsong clearer and more beautiful, the trees more lush and full than those of my own forest, or was it my stranger's eyes that made them seem so? Above me, I saw a tumble of sparkling water where a stream cascaded down the mountainside. Lacking other guidance, I followed it, scrambling up over boulders and through thickets. As I climbed, I felt the song of the Land rise through my body, filling me until I nearly burst with it.

When I came to my senses, I was kneeling by a rocky pool. At one end, the water churned beneath a wide cascade; at the other, it slipped between two great boulders and out of sight. Great dark hollies stood sentinel around that pool, and its stones were patched with pale, dense humps of moss. Though I'd never seen it before, I knew as surely as I knew my blood flowed through my veins that this moss was what I needed to draw the fever from my deer-man's wound.

As I reached to gather it, a bear's paw, dark-furred and powerfully clawed, reached over my shoulder.

Heart pounding, I plunged into the pool and splashed away, clumsy with panic, glancing over my shoulder to see if the bear followed. The rock where I had knelt was empty. I paddled back, wondering whether perhaps my eyes had been playing tricks on me. Reaching up to the rock to pull myself out of the water, I saw once again the heavy, furred arms of a bear. But this time I knew that they were mine.

With my acceptance of that knowledge came the welcome of the Land. My eyes, my nose, my tongue, the pads of my paws, the wind in my fur, the rustle of the leaves and the song of the water spoke to my blood. They told me that I had lived an exile in a foreign land, starving all that I was and

could be, subsisting on crumbs of power when I could have feasted. They told I was home now, and whole.

I do not know how long I stayed in that enchanted place, or entirely what I did there. I know I ate, for when I could think again, I saw fish bones scattered on a rock and my paws were sticky with honey. The sun was low, the wind smelled of evening. All in a panic, I remembered the deer-man waiting in my cottage with his beautiful, hunted eyes and his smell of wood smoke and musk—and his festering wound, which might have killed him, for all I knew, while I frolicked here in enchanted woods.

Gathering the simples that would make my deer-man strong again was easy. I knew what I needed and how to use it as I knew how to walk and breathe. Leaving the pool and the guardian hollies was much harder, but I was not so drunk with power that I'd leave my stag, my deer, my hart to die of the wound I'd given him. And now that I could think again, I found I missed my own forest.

The journey back to my glade was faster than my journey out. Bears can gallop quite fast, I discovered, and do not need to skirt bramble patches. Still, when I crossed the river again, it became harder and harder to keep the bear wrapped about me. Eventually I was forced to go on my two feet, cold and half blind in the dark. Yet, weak as I felt myself, I knew I was stronger than I had been.

By dint of running without rest for a night and a day, I reached my cottage not long after sunset. My deer-man was alive, but only just, his hands twitching feebly in fever dreams, his face ashen, his eyes sunk deep in bruised hollows. When I tore the bandage from his thigh, his wound ran with pus and stank of foulness.

I made up the fire, drew water, and heated herbs in it, along with a pinch of soil from the handful I'd dug from the Land. As the posset steeped, I drained my deer-man's wound, washed it with herb-scented, earth-tinted water, packed it with the white moss, and bandaged it afresh. Finally I held a cup of the same earthy brew to his lips, and when he had drunk it, I crept into his fur-lined nest, took his head on my shoulder, and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

Some time later, I felt something tickling my cheek and opened my eyes to find myself nose to velvety nose with my stag. Seeing me awake, he snorted, as though in greeting.

I put a hand on his bandaged haunch; his hide shivered, but he did not startle away. Gently I unbound the cloth and unpeeled the moss.

The wound was closed and almost fully healed, a pink scar amid his tawny hair. Why this should have made me weep when his suffering had not, I do not know, but weep I did, my forehead against his haunch. Finally he nudged me ungently with his nose, telling me as clearly as speech that he would be up and out of the cramped, dark cottage and out in the wide forest.

Little as I wanted to, I let him go.

I have never feared solitude. All my life, I have lived content with the forest and my mother for company, nor wanted any other. After she died, I missed her, oh, most terribly. But I was not afraid until the day my hart left me to run in the forest. Every sound made me jump in case it was my deer returning, or the hunters, or some danger I could not foresee. I lost hope of seeing him and found it again, over and over, in a frustrating cycle that was more exhausting than a day's hunting. And when I was not fretting over him, I was staring at my thin, brown, naked hands and wondering if my mother had ever had the power to turn into a bear, and why she had given it up if she had, and why she had been at such pains to keep that power from me. In late afternoon I came to the conclusion that my unhappy state was all my mother's fault, and that my deer was gone for good. Then I wept and dried my eyes and went to fetch water for dinner.

As I reached the stream in the gathering dusk, my hart stepped out of the trees, lowered his head, and drank.

I stood as though I'd been turned to stone, my bucket on my hip. The deer raised his dripping muzzle from the water. The sun set, and the man rose from his crouch and tossed back his tawny hair.

Next moment, I was across the stream with my arms around him. Under my hands, his back was warm and smooth and hard, his unshaven cheek rough against my face. A pounding shook my body—his heart or mine, or both—and my breath came fast and shallow, as though I'd been running. For a moment, he stood like a tree in my embrace, and then his arms lifted to encircle me, and he was mouthing my ear, my cheek, my lips, and I was mouthing his and we were both breathless and so unsteady that our legs would not hold us upright. We fell to the moss, and what happened there transformed me as utterly as crossing the river to the forbidden Land.

LATER THAT NIGHT, we warmed our cold feet by the fire and ate toasted chestnuts and hearth cakes with honey. My deer-man's hand was never far from my body, nor my body from his hand. We smiled when our eyes met. And haltingly, shyly, we talked. I told him as much of my history as I knew. It was little enough—that I was born not long after my mother had fled the north, that we had lived together peacefully, that she had died in my fourteenth year, that I had lived now three years alone, that I had never met or spoken to any man or woman apart from her until the day my arrow had felled him and brought twelve hunters to my door.

"So now you know what there is to know about me," I said. "I would know as much about you. What is your name? Who are your parents? Are you a shape-shifter by nature, or is it a curse?"

This made him laugh. "You might call it a curse. *He* called it an honor, a glory, a test of my spirit and my strength."

"He?"

"Arnulf. My wizard." That deerlike huff again. "Not so much mine as I was his, though. *His* candidate. *His* pupil. His Little King."

I had had enough of pretending to understand. "I don't know what you're talking about, my hart."

Something of the deer's blind panic widened his eyes. "I can't tell you any more. It's forbidden."

"Who forbids it?" I was losing patience. "Your precious wizard Arnulf? Whom you fear and flee as from a wolf?"

He turned away from me, head bent. "It's no use, Mildryth. I cannot be to you what I want to be. I am a fugitive, an outcast, disgraced. The best thing—the only thing—I can do now is run and never look back."

I seized the skin draped over his naked shoulders in my fists, brought his fine, high-bridged nose up to mine. "The best thing for whom?" I growled. "Not for me, and not for you, either, whatever you say." I gave him a shake. "Begin at the beginning."

At first he would not tell me. The bear in me wanted to growl and threaten, but deer run from bears. Remembering how my mother would coax me with games to some task I loathed, I kissed him and tumbled with him until I thought he'd forgotten such a person as Arnulf existed. And then, when we lay curled together by the dying fire, I asked him again for his story.

His name, I learned, was Erdwyn. He was one of a cohort of royal half-brothers begotten by the last king on one of his regular progresses through the Land. It was one of a king's chief functions, to breed armies for future kings. Another was to lead the sons of past kings into battle, if the need arose. Another was to die, returning his blood and his magic to the Land, that it might be rich and strong. The real rulers of the Land were the wizards, whose council oversaw trade and commerce, cast spells of plenty and healing, and kept the complicated lists of bloodlines that determined which women should come to the king's tent when a progress brought him to a town.

Erdwyn had been one of these princelings, born in the foothills of the mountains between his Land and mine. When he was five years old, he'd been sent north, as the law dictated, to the Royal Holt of Karleigh.

"And what did your mother say to that?" I asked.

"I don't remember my mother at all," he said, and his sweet voice was full of sadness. "All my memories are of training and learning and fighting with my brothers. Until last year."

"What happened then?"

"I was chosen by a wizard to be a Little King."

"By Arnulf?"

"By Arnulf."

"And what does it mean, to be a Little King?"

"There are—were—twelve of us." The words came haltingly. "I suppose the rest are dead by now—all but one. We lived in the Wizard's Holt, learning the magics of war and increase, of the hunt and of the field. It was very wonderful: sacred and terrible." He shrugged. "I cannot speak of it—I have no words. Anyway, that lasted until a month or so ago, when the old king, Anselm, gave his blood to the Land."

He fell silent. I stroked his hair, my hand catching on the twigs tied into it. "And Arnulf turned you into a deer?"

"It is the ordeal of kingship. The wizards work transformation on the Little Kings, turning us into deer and releasing us into the forest." He moved restlessly in my arms. "What happens then, I cannot say. Deer do not think as men think, and I was half crazed with magic besides. But I was told that he who is able, by strength of will and the Land's magic, to return to the Holt as a man is the true king."

I lay in the dark, listening to his breathing, knowing the story was not yet done. "What becomes of the other Little Kings?" I asked gently.

"Their blood and magic return to the Land," he said. "Only the true king can be allowed to live."

"And you?"

"I ran away. Whether as king or as deer, I knew I must die before my time, and I did not want to die. And Arnulf—well, I hated him." It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him why, but there was that in his voice that made me tighten my arms around him and hold my peace.

He sighed. "I don't remember how or when I crossed the river, but I will never forget how I felt when I found myself a man again. I thought I was free—free of Arnulf's spells, the sacrifices and duties of kingship, the threat of death. Then morning came, and I was a deer again. That night was worst of all, for I knew then how far I was from freedom." He wound his hands in my hair and kissed my mouth. "Until I met you, and found how sweet it was to be bound to one who loves you."

THAT NIGHT I DREAMED OF A STRANGE BEAR running through the forest. I knew, as one knows things in dreams, that this bear was searching for me, and when he found me, he would kill me if he could. He was bigger than I, and older, but not so fast. He stumbled as he ran, as though he were wounded, though I saw no blood on his fur. Closer and closer he came, until I could smell the spoiled-meat stench of his breath. Roaring with fury at his trespass, I reared up on my back legs and charged.

And woke. It was dawn; my head was pillowed on warm, living hide, and a deer's frightened heart thuttered under my ear.

As I lifted my head, my hart sprang to his feet, forelegs braced, nostrils and eyes wide.

"I know," I said. "But he is not in his Land. He is in mine, fed with my monthly blood, obedient to my magic. This is a fight I can win."

My deer huffed and tossed his horns, bringing bundles of drying herbs down from the rafters. Rising, I put on tunic and leggings, opened the door, and stepped outside just as twelve familiar huntsmen entered my glade.

Between one breath and the next, they had unslung their bows, whisked arrows from their quivers, and drawn their bowstrings to their ears. My stag belled a challenge; the bear within me stirred and growled.

A man pushed through the wall of hunters, a tall man, barrel-chested and bearded, a bearskin draped around his shoulders.

"Go away out of this, you fools!" he cried. "This is wizard's business!"

The hunters melted into the forest.

It was Arnulf, of course. I knew the scent of him from my dream, as he must have known mine. Even as a man, he was more than half bear. He glared at my stag from under his bristling brows. "I am ashamed," he growled in a voice like summer thunder, "to find any Little King of mine hiding behind the skirts of a Southron hedge-witch."

My deer tossed his head, lifted his forefoot, and pawed the ground angrily.

Arnulf laughed. "You know it's futile to challenge me, Erdwyn.

You learned that even before you learned that witches are an abomination and must be killed. But come, let us not threaten and bluster at one another. Today is a day of great rejoicing. Your brother the Little King Gertwyn returned two days ago to the Wizard's Holt. He'll be crowned at the full of the moon. In honor of our new king, I am willing to be generous. Return to the Land with me, give up your blood as you are bound to do, and I will spare the witch's life."

I listened to this speech with rising anger. "He doesn't want to come with you," I said. "He's not ready to die, and I don't see why he should have to, just because you say so."

Arnulf's beard writhed. "Silence, witch!" he snarled, his eyes fixed steadily on my deer. "Do not meddle with magics you do not understand."

The bear within me stirred angrily. "I understand, *wizard*, that this is *my* land, by right of my blood and my mother's blood, spilled on it at each full moon. If it comes to a fight, I think I will win."

Arnulf's eyes flicked toward me and away again. I had no skill to read his face, but body and smell told me he was afraid. "Witches have no land. You are nothing but an exile, lingering on the borders of power, untrained and half savage."

"I am not without power and I am not untrained. I healed your Little King, after all."

"Healed?" Arnulf roared. "You've done much more than that, witch. You've bound him to you, blood and body, as the witch Hild bound King Detlef five hundred years past."

"And what's wrong with that?" I asked.

Arnulf's face twisted. "A witch is an abomination. That is enough. The wizards give their blood to the Land. As they give the blood of any girl-child born with unnatural powers." Arnulf drew a knife from his belt, the honed bronze bright and glittering as a sunbeam in his hand. "As your mother's should have been given. As I will give yours."

For the first time he looked full at me, his gaze an almost physical pressure.

I pulled the bear around me, roaring from a mouth grown wide and full of teeth.

Arnulf startled, his eyes and mouth rounding. I smelled shock on him and confusion.

"Stop!" he shouted. "I did not know! I will not harm you, I swear it! See, I throw down my knife!"

But it was too late. The bear possessed me. I lumbered toward my enemy, grunting my challenge. My stag followed me.

The hunters Arnulf dismissed had not gone far. In a heartbeat, my deer and I were in a ring of arrows, nocked and ready to fly.

My bear instincts told me to claw and rend; my human mind told me to surrender. Frustrated beyond endurance, I roared to shake the forest.

"For the Land's sake, stay your hands!" Arnulf shouted. "The man who harms her forfeits his life."

Then he backed slowly away, his head turned aside, whuffing submissively, acknowledging defeat.

This abrupt surrender so astonished me that the bear fell from me. My legs buckled; I threw my arms around my deer to hold myself upright.

"Put down your bows, you fools!" Arnulf cried, and the hunters hesitated, eyeing him as foxes eye a wolf. "Well, what are you waiting for? Make a fire and fetch water and unpack my bag. If I must bargain with a witch, I'd as soon do it over a cup of tea."

AND SO IT WAS, SOME LITTLE TIME LATER, that I sat across an open fire from the wizard with my deer at my side, sipping a hot amber brew that made my heart race.

Very much at his ease Arnulf seemed, for a man sharing a hearth with an abomination. Yet I could smell eagerness on him, like a bear within paw's

reach of a honeycomb, and was afraid. For among the many things my mother had told me was no hint of how to bargain with a wizard.

Now that he had decided to speak to me, Arnulf was very full of questions. What was my mother's name, he wanted to know, and where did she come from? Who was her father? Who was mine? Where had she learned her craft and what had become of her? I did not know the answers to these questions, nor would I have answered them if I could. So I only stared at his wagging beard and his bright, deep-set eyes until he fell silent.

"I see you do not trust me," he said. "I do not blame you. You are a power in your land as I am in mine, and yet I came to you with threats and arrows and brazen knives. Forgive me, if you can, and hear me, for I offer you a bargain that will benefit both you and me."

"I will not forgive you," I said, "but I will hear you. Hearing is not agreeing, after all."

His thick beard bunched over his cheeks. "It is not. Well, then. I promise to take my huntsmen and depart from here in return for this: one thing of my choosing, to be collected by me, in person, from you, at the end of a year and a day."

He offered this speech with the air of one bearing an armful of flowers. But even I, untutored as I was, could see the nettle hidden among them. "And what if you should choose the deer, or my life, or perhaps enough blood to satisfy the hunger of your Land?"

He grinned, and I saw his teeth had been filed into points. "Half savage, perhaps, but not stupid. Will it content you if I swear by the Land that I will not take the deer, or, if you succeed in breaking the enchantment, the man, nor any part of you or him that would threaten your life or your safety?"

My stag gave an oddly undeerlike snort. I glanced down at him, surprised, to see his leaf-shaped ears pricked and his gaze fixed on Arnulf.

"He is bound to us by blood." Arnulf sounded amused. "Of course he understands us. You may ask his advice, if you wish. Though I should warn you that even when he walks on two legs, he is a better fighter than a strategist."

Since I did not know what a strategist was, and since it did not seem fair to take such a decision alone, I stroked my deer's wiry back and said, "What do you say, my hart? Shall we take this bargain?"

"Think carefully, Erdwyn," Arnulf said, "understanding that, if you refuse, there is nothing left for either of you but an early death and scorched land where once a cottage stood. Considering what the Land loses—what *I* lose—in losing you, I think my offer more than fair."

It was not fair by my reckoning, but I thought it was the best we could hope for. My deer must have come to the same conclusion, for he dipped his head twice.

"We accept your offer," I said. "Now take your tea and your hunters and go."

THE MOON HAS GROWN ROUND and shrunk again six times since that day. I have spent the time in learning to tame and use the magic awakened in me when I crossed the border into my mother's Land. By my will, my true love is a man again by day as well as by night, and takes his bow to hunt mountain sheep, deer, and rabbits. I do not hunt, for like the moon, I am round and heavy with my growing child. How Arnulf could have seen within me a seed so newly planted, I cannot tell, but we have no doubt, my love and I, that he knew what I carried. It was our child he bargained for, and it is our child he will claim in six months' time.

Therefore, we will leave this forest I have bound with my monthly blood and journey to the plains to the south, where men live in cities built of stone and magic is as rare as berries in January. We will find some patch of land there to build our house and raise this child—and the children that follow him—far from the dark magics of the north. I will give my blood to that land as I have given it to my forest, binding it to me and to my sons and daughters after me, passing on my mother's wisdom and my mother's stories, teaching them what I learned when I was the witch in the wood.

The Tragedy of King Alexander the Stag

DELIA SHERMAN

OF THE KINGS WHO DIED YOUNG, some fell in battle and some to the wizards' sacrificial knife after only one Progress or two, in times of peace. And such a one was Alexander, who might have been a great leader had he been born in a seemlier time, under a gentler wizard. For he chafed under Guidry's rule and questioned his precepts, and thought to have brought a queen into the Royal Park and would have changed all manner of things for love of her.

Not long after Alexander had endured his trial and his crowning, he called upon a noble of the Council of Nobles in the royal city, and dined with him in the hall of his house. According to the custom of the day, the noble did him all honor, carving the king's meat to him with his own hands and setting his own daughter to stand behind his chair and pour his wine and hold the basin for his fingers. Now his daughter Rosamond was as black and silver as a moonlit night, and the king's eye falling upon her, desired her for his bed and his pleasure. Which pleasure the maiden was fain to render him; for he was comely and warlike to look upon, with rubies plaited in his long pale hair. And so they lay together, not one night only as the custom was, but whenever he might with honor escape from his duties, and there grew between them a love that was not of the body only, but of the heart and spirit, a love common to all human kind but forbidden to kings.

A Chronicle-History of the Northern Monarchs
—Nicholas Hollis

Alexander lay in his lover's arms and was happy. He had slept after he'd loved her, and wakened deep in the night with his head butted into her soft breast, her hair and her arms twined around him. Under the furs, the air was warm and damp and fragrant with musk. He sighed and rolled away, knowing he'd wake her, knowing that this was the time for talk and kisses, before morning and Guidry called him back to duty.

"What are you thinking?" she said in his ear, very soft and slurred, half-dreaming still.

"How I'd like to stay here forever," he answered.

"Forever is a long time." There was a smile in her voice. "Two days in bed, and you'd be fretting for your horse and your Companions, wondering what he was doing, who he was talking to, what he was planning."

Alexander eased his arm under her shoulders, which she lifted to accommodate him, and gathered her to him. She was a tall woman, with a deep bosom and haunches round as a doe's. Yet she seemed small beside the long-limbed, muscled bulk of her lover.

"I wouldn't stay in bed," he told her. "I would walk with you in the gardens and ride with you in the wood with a falcon on my wrist. I'd play Castles with your father and teach your little brother how to ride. And every night, I'd lie beside you and rest my head on my favorite pillow. How soft you are," he went on, cupping her breast.

Rosamond nuzzled into his neck and his silky hair, but said nothing.

"Why, you're afraid of something," he murmured. "You're trembling like a doe waiting for the hunter to pass. What have you to fear? I am here and I stand between you and every harm."

"*Every* harm?" she whispered.

"Certainly." He leaned up on his elbow, trying to pierce the darkness to her face. "What is it, my love? What is the King's mistress afraid of?"

"You," she answered. "*Him*. Guidry. The law of the Land, that governs all you do."

"Not all," he protested, laughing. "The Land does not send me to your bed night after night. And Guidry has said nothing against you."

"He is displeased, though. How could he not be? I've taken you away from him, I've broken your bonds, I've…"

"Enough." Alexander sat up, found tinder-box and candle, and struck a light. When he saw that she was weeping, he rubbed his face against her and licked her neck comfortingly, and still she wept until he grew angry.

"I've told you, there's nothing to fear," he said. "But if you will not believe that I am strong enough to protect what's mine from harm, I will leave you to your weeping. Perhaps I will return and perhaps I won't. I have no desire to be drowned in salt water."

Rosamond sat up and wiped her face on the linen sheet. "I am with child," she said thickly. "Your child."

Alexander stared at her, eyes wide in his long face, and then he grinned, and then he shouted and hugged her to him, furs, linens, and all. "How long have you known?" he demanded between kisses. "Why did you not tell me? How could you think I would be angry? When will it be born? What shall we name it? Do you know how much I love you?"

He gave her no time to answer, but kissed her again and again, kisses leading to loving and loving to sleep, so that it was morning before they spoke again of the child to come and of Guidry.

"It's very simple," Alexander said. He pulled an embroidered tunic over his head and shook out his long, pale hair. The stones with which it was braided clicked as he tossed it back over his shoulder. "Guidry will accept your living in the Royal Park. He has no choice—he is bound to me as I am to him. Unless I perform the rites with him, he has no magic."

"It is not simple," she said, but he didn't hear her. He rubbed his cheek against her head and left her.

Outside, the air was green and damp, with an undercurrent of wood smoke and horse dung. Alexander filled his nose and lungs with it, then ambled away from Rosamond's house towards the Royal Park and the compound and the training fields to Guidry's grove.

He found Guidry in the outermost of the sacred places, sitting in the embrace of a huge oak-stump carved into a chair. He was writing in a leather-covered book.

"Welcome, my king," he said as the young man drew close. "The omens are right for a new progress. The route is set and the maidens' names are chosen. We will leave tomorrow."

"No."

Guidry looked up from his writing. He was a massive, dark man like a bear, with a bear's blunt face and small eyes set deep under a heavy brow. "I cannot think I heard you aright, my king."

"You could hear a seed take root," said Alexander bitterly. "I will not go on progress. I just went on progress."

Guidry shrugged. "Two years ago. It is time. And you liked the last one well enough."

"Two years ago, I had not met Rosamond," said the king.

"You need children."

"I have children—over a hundred of them, at last count."

"One hundred and thirty-two," said Guidry, and stroked his grizzled beard. "You father had more than three hundred."

The king made a huffing noise. "One hundred and thirty-three. Rosamond is pregnant. And I will not leave her in order to copulate with a hundred drugged and bespelled virgins whose faces I will not see and whose voices I will not remember, just to supply officers for my successor's army. I love her and I'm going to bring her here to live until her baby's born."

Guidry put aside his quill and his book. "You would bring a woman to live here, in the Royal Park?"

"I would."

"And where would she live?"

"In my quarters, with me."

"And what will she do there? From the youngest prince to the most venerable of the wizards, each has his place in the great chain of magic binding us to the Land. Where is her place, eh?"

The king's nostrils flared and he lowered his head stubbornly. "Rosamond is my comfort and my mate."

"Have you forgotten, my king? I am your comfort and your mate." Guidry darted out a great hand and caught the king's wrist. As he twisted it to display the wreath of oak and ivy tattooed around the king's sinewy forearm, the sleeve of Guidry's robe fell away from the holly leaves that sprang green and living from the flesh of his arm.

"I have not forgotten that I am bound to you," said the king between his teeth. "I can never forget that."

"Then how can you speak to me of comforts and mates?" growled Guidry, and flung the king's arm from him. "How can you speak to me of women? Women are like the Land. They belong to the king, to be ploughed and sown with the seed of future generations. Only common men cleave to one woman."

"I love her, Guidry."

"It is your duty to love me."

"I fear you," said the king. "I desire the ecstasy I feel when we come together in power. That is not love."

"It is the love between a wizard and a king. It is the love you have sworn to me."

"I didn't know," the young king cried. "I didn't know comfort or peace or joy until I knew Rosamond. I have been reborn in her arms, and am no longer the man who swore to love you, and only you, all the days of my life."

"Are you then no longer king?"

Beyond words, the king trumpeted with rage and charged head-long at the wizard, who grinned a toothy grin. The holly leaves bristled on his arms, and his black eyes glittered furiously below his brows. He caught the king's battering fists in hands strong as vises and wrestled with him, each muscle straining. A twist and a heave, and the king lay on the ground with his face in the grass and Guidry kneeling over him, holding him by the wrists and his long hair.

"Do you submit?" Guidry growled.

"No," said the king into the soil.

Guidry pulled up on the imprisoned wrists until every sinew in the king's back creaked and his shoulders threatened to pop from their sockets. Then he made a disgusted sound and let him go. "You are not a recalcitrant wizard," he said, "to yield up your will to me, mewing and begging. You are my king, and I am your wizard. We serve the land side by side."

The king rolled over onto his back, panting. "I was not mewing."

"Nor begging. And you would probably swallow your own tongue rather than do either. That's why I chose you among the little kings and prepared you for your trial. You are a warrior, not a lover."

"I can be both."

"Only to me. Remember, you are not as human as you once were."

The king lay still, his tattooed arm shading his eyes. Smiling up at his wizard, his subject and his lord, he said, "I'm human enough to make bargains. I will come to your bed and perform my part in the rituals of power and lead the army against the Southern King when the treaty fails. And Rosamond will come into the Park and live here in peace and honor."

"Until her child is born," said Guidry.

The king rose in a single movement, tall and shining against the dark leaves of the grove. "At least until my child is born."

> IT IS SAID IN THE POEM called "The King's Lament," that the king offered prayers to the Land that the child be a girl and share her mother's fate and not her father's, to be servant to the land and both less and more than a man. But his prayers did not find favor with the land, for the child was a boy, to be taken from his mother in his fifth year and brought up among the other princes of his father's getting.
>
> *A Chronicle-History of the Northern Monarchs*
> —Nicholas Hollis

GUIDRY SAT CROSS-LEGGED ON A ROCK, whetting his knife. At his back was a hill and a cave and a cold, black stream. At his face was a small clearing carpeted with moss and flowering vines, and a round, deep pool that returned the gaze of the cloudless sky like an eye. It was noon, or close enough.

The king would be here soon.

He'd known the price of his kingship from the beginning. They'd all known—the king's sons—since they were brought into the Royal Park when they were five years old. Kings gave their lives to the land. While they lived, they gave their hands, their minds, and their seed. At their death, they gave their blood.

In the distance, a hunting horn sounded, clear and cold in the still air. Around the glade, oak and ivy whispered eagerly together, and the pool shuddered into a ring of ripples. Guidry laid aside the whetstone and tried the glittering black blade against his thumb. It cut deep, and almost without pain. Satisfied, he hung the knife from his girdle and rose.

The Land trembled against his bare soles, setting the vines nodding. It was eager, scenting blood. Or perhaps it was angry at the insult the king had offered it, or fearful, reflecting the king's fear. It was the Land, unhuman, and no man might know what it felt. Guidry knew what it wanted, though, and loved it more than he loved any of his kings. He stooped and laid his hand upon the earth, stroking, soothing.

Beyond the glade, there was a noise of broken wood, of hooves striking sparks from stone, and a rumor of male voices shouting, "The deer! The deer!" Guidry straightened, planted his feet in the moss and damp earth, and waited.

Something like a white mist clouded the holly bushes at the clearing's edge. It was a white deer, a stag with a fine, wide rack of horns, its pale flanks dappled with blood and streaked with green from its headlong flight through the wood. It broke through the holly and stumbled to the pool, where it stood with its flanks heaving and its nose bowed to the clear water.

Guidry said, "Alexander."

The stag jerked up its head, pricked its leaf-like ears forward, and roared. The attitude revealed a golden chain and a fine woven band, crimson as new blood, lying snugly against its creamy throat.

"You aren't going to give in, are you?" murmured Guidry, almost tenderly. "That's why I chose you. That's why you might have been the greatest of our kings. Now that honor must go to your son."

The stage came to attention.

"It need not have come to this," Guidry said. "Not now; not yet. I might have allowed you to play at families with your mistress and your child in the Royal park for two or three years yet. But you must plot to fly to the South, to our ancient enemies."

Guidry pulled his feet from the earth and stalked, as it were a tree walking, towards the pool and the white stag. "You plotted to fly, with the woman and the child, to rob the Land of your hands, your mind, your seed, your blood. For love. For human love."

Guidry was now within arm's reach of the stag, whose legs were trembling with its desire to bolt, whose nostrils flared with its desire to attack.

"Yes, yes," said Guidry. "You are very brave, very strong, and very beautiful. The Land will grow strong on your blood."

Guidry drew the black knife from his girdle and the stag rolled its eyes at him, blue as the pool at its feet and startlingly human in its narrow face. It lifted its head proudly, and the sun drew diamond from the polished edge, then ruby from the blood that sprang from the white throat. For a moment, King Alexander stood at the pool's edge, a naked man crowned with horn and cloaked with blood and his long, pale hair. And then he collapsed upon the moss.

Guidry knelt by the king's body and thrust his blade three times into the earth to clean it. Then he closed the blue eyes, kissed the parted lips, and heaved the corpse across his shoulders to carry it into the cave.

> AND IT IS SAID THAT Rosamond's son was that Montjoy, called the Diplomat, Chosen by Guidry's successor Alaric and tested in his seventeenth year, who compounded with the queen of the South, and went with his Wizard and his Companions to dwell with her as King of a new land in her capital city. And his life was long as his father's was not, who was written in the Lists of Kings as Alexander the Stag, for that he was headstrong and quarrelsome in his season and died to bring plenty to the Land.
>
> *A Chronicle-History of the Northern Monarchs*
> —Nicholas Hollis

A Wild and a Wicked Youth

ELLEN KUSHNER

"He's dead, mother."

"Who's dead, Richard?"

His mother did not look up from rolling out her pastry. They lived in the country; things died. And her son did not seem particularly upset. But then, he seldom did. She was raising him not to be afraid of anything if she could help it.

"The man in the orchard."

Octavia St Vier carefully put down her rolling pin, wiped her hands on her apron, and tucked up her skirts. At the door she slipped into her wooden clogs, because it was spring and the ground was still muddy. The boy followed her out to the orchard, where a man lay still as the grave under an apple tree, his hands clutching tight at something on his chest.

"Oh, love, he's not dead."

"He smells dead," said her son.

Octavia chuckled. "He does that. He's dead drunk, is all, and old and probably sick. He's got good boots, but they're all worn out, see? He must have come a long way."

"What's he holding?" Before she could think to stop him, her son reached between the old man's hands to tug at the end of what he clutched in the folds of his messy cloak.

Like a corpse in a comedy, the old man sat suddenly bolt upright, still gripping one end of the long pointed object whose other end was in her son's hands. It was the end of a sword, sheathed in cracked leather. Octavia was not usually a screamer, but she screamed.

"Rarrrrrr," the old man growled furiously. It seemed to be all he could manage at the moment, but his meaning was clear.

"Richard," Octavia said, as carefully as if she were back at her girlhood elocution lessons—though this was not the sort of sentence they had been

designed for—"put the man's sword down."

She could tell her son didn't want to. His hand was closed around the pommel, encircled itself by a swirl of metal which no doubt had its own special name as well. It was a beautiful object; its function was clearly to keep anything outside from touching the hand within.

The old man growled again. He tugged on the sword, but he was so weak, and her son's grip held so fast, that it only separated scabbard from blade. Octavia saw hard steel emerge from the leather. "Richard…" She used the Voice of Command that every mother knows. "*Now*."

Her son dropped the sword abruptly, and just as abruptly scrambled up the nearest tree. He broke off a branch, which was strictly forbidden, and waved it at the sky.

The old man pulled the weapon back into his personal aura of funk, rags, hunger, and age. He coughed, hawked, spat, repeated that, and dragged himself up until his back was to the apple tree's trunk.

"Quick little nipper," he said. "'Sgonna break his neck."

Octavia shielded her eyes to look up at the boy in the tree. "Oh," she said, "he never falls. You get used to it. Would you like some water?"

THE OLD MAN DIDN'T CLEAN UP PARTICULARLY WELL, but he did clean up. When he was sober, he cut wood and carried water for their little cottage. He had very strong arms. He did stay sober long enough to spend all of one day and most of the next sanding every inch of his rust-pocked blade—there was quite a lot of it, it was nearly as tall as the boy's shoulder—and then oiling it, over and over. He wouldn't let anyone help. Richard did offer. But the old man said he made him nervous, always wriggling about like that, couldn't he keep still for one god-blasted moment, and get off that table, no not up into the rafters you're enough to give a man palpitations now get outta here if you can't keep still.

"It's my house," Richard said. "You're just charity."

"Am not neither. I'm a servant. That's what it's come to. Fetch and carry for madam your mother, but at least I've got my pride, and what does she want all those books for anyway? And where's your daddy?"

It wasn't like he hadn't heard that one before. "She left him behind," he said. "He couldn't keep up. She likes the books better. And me." Richard lifted a book off the shelf. He was supposed to ask permission first, but she wasn't around to ask. "There's pictures. Animals' insides. Inside-out. See?"

He found a particularly garish one. Last year he'd been scared to look too closely at it, but now that he was big it filled him with horrific delight. He thrust it suddenly up into the old man's face.

But the old man reacted a great deal more strongly than even a very horrible picture should have warranted. As soon as Richard shoved the book at him he jumped backward, knocking over his chair, one arm thrown back, his other arm forward to strike the book from the boy's hand.

Quickly the boy pivoted, drawing his mother's book out of harm's way. He had no desire to have his ass handed to him on a platter, the official punishment for messing up books.

The old man fell back, panting. "You saw that coming," he wheezed. "You devil's whelp."

He lunged at him again. Richard protected the book.

The old man started chasing him around the room, taking swipes at him from different angles, high, low, sideways…It was scary, but also funny. There was no way the old man was going to touch him, after all. Richard could always see just what he was aiming for, just where his hand would fall—except, of course, that it never could.

Not a screamer, Octavia let out a yell when she walked into the room. "*What in the Seven Hells are you doing with my son?*"

The old man stopped cold. He drew himself up, carefully taking deep breaths of air so he could be steady enough to say clearly, "Madam, I am training him. In the art of the sword. It cannot have escaped your notice that he has an aptitude."

Octavia put down the dead starling that she was carrying. "I'm afraid it has," she said. "But do go on."

RICHARD PRACTICED IN THE ORCHARD WITH A STICK. His best friend, Crispin, wanted to practice too, but Crispin's parents had impressed upon him that lords did not fight with steel. It wasn't noble; you hired others to do it for you, like washing dishes or ironing shirts or figuring accounts.

"But it's not steel," Richard explained; "it's wood. It's just a stick, Crispin; come on."

The old man had no interest in teaching Crispin, and anyway it might have gotten back to his father, so Richard just showed his friend everything he learned, and they practiced together. Privately, Richard thought Crispin wasn't very good, but he kept the thought to himself. Crispin had a temper. He was

capable of taking umbrage for days at a time, which was dull, but could usually be resolved either in a fistfight or an elaborate ritual apology orchestrated by Crispin.

Richard didn't mind that. Crispin was inventive. It was never the same thing twice and it was never boring—and never all that hard, really. Richard was perfectly capable of crossing the brook on the dead log blindfolded, or of fetching the bird's nest down from under the topmost eave by Crispin's mother's window. He did get in trouble the time he climbed up the chimney, because chimneys are dirty and his mother had to waste her time washing all his clothes out. But Crispin gave him his best throwing stick to make up for it, so that worked out all right. And Crispin's other ideas were just as good as his vengeful ones. Crispin was the one who figured out how they could get the cakes meant for the visitors on Last Night and make it look like the cat had done it. And Crispin was the one who covered for him the time they borrowed his father's hunting spears to play Kings in the orchard, when they forgot to bring them back in time. They never told on each other, no matter what.

Crispin's father was all right, except for his prejudice against steel. He winked when the boys were caught stealing apples from his orchards, and even let Richard ride the horses that were out to pasture; if he could catch one, he could ride it, that was the deal (as long as it wasn't a brood mare) and Crispin with him.

Crispin's father was Lord Trevelyan, and had a seat on the Council of Lords, but he didn't like the City, and never went there if he could help it. Every Quarter Day, Trevelyan's steward brought Richard's mother the money her family sent from the city to keep her there. A certain amount of it went right back to town, to be spent on books of Natural History the next time Lady Trevelyan went there to shop. Lady Trevelyan was stylish and liked theatre. She went to the city every year. She did not buy the books herself, of course, and probably would have liked to forget all about them, but her husband had instructed that they be seen to, along with everything else the estate required from town.

What mattered was that the money came, and came regularly. Without it, his mother said, they would have to go live in a cave somewhere—and not a nice cave, either. "Why couldn't we just go live with your family?" Richard asked.

"Their house is too small."

"You said it had seventeen rooms."

"Seventeen rooms, and no air to breathe. And no place to cut up bats."

"Mother, when you find out how bats can fly, will you write a book?"

"Maybe. But I think it would be more interesting to learn about how frogs breathe, then, don't you?"

So she always counted the money carefully when it came in, and hid it in her special hiding place, a big book called *Toads and their Discontents*. There were some pictures of Toads, all right, but their Discontents had been hollowed out to make a stash for coins.

Shortly after the latest Quarter Day, the old swordsman disappeared. Octavia St Vier anxiously counted her stash, but all the coins were still there.

She gave some to him the next time he came and went, though. It had been a beautiful summer, a poet's summer of white roses and green-gold grain, and tinted apples swelling on the bough against a sky so blue it didn't seem quite real. Richard found that he remembered most of the old man's teaching from when he was little, and the old man was so pleased that he showed him more ways to make the pretend steel dance at the end of his arm—*Make it part of your arm, boyo!*—and to dance away from it, to outguess the other blade and make your body less of a target.

Crispin got bored, and then annoyed. "All you ever want to do is play swords anymore!"

"It's good," Richard said, striking at an oak tree with a wooden lathe flexible enough to bear it.

"No, it's not. It's just the same thing, over and over."

"No, it's not." Richard imagined a slightly larger opponent, and shifted his wrist. "Come on, Crispin, I'll show you how to disarm someone in three moves."

"No!" Crispin kicked the oak. He was smart enough not to kick Richard when Richard was armed. "What are you stabbing that tree for?" he taunted. "Are you trying to kill it?"

"Nope." Richard kept drilling.

"You're trying to kill it because you're scared to climb it."

"No, I'm not."

"Prove it."

So he did.

"The black mare's in the field," Crispin told him when he'd hauled himself all the way up to the branch Richard was on, by dint of telling himself it didn't matter.

"The racer?"

"Yah."

"How long?"

"Dunno."

"Can we catch her?"

"We can try. Unless you'd rather play swords against trees. She's pretty fierce."

Richard threw an acorn at Crispin. Crispin ducked, and nearly fell out of the tree.

"Don't do that," he said stiffly, holding on for dear life. "Or I'll never let you near our horses again."

"Let's get down," Richard said. He eased himself down first, leaving Crispin to follow where he couldn't be seen. Crispin got mad if you criticized his climbing, or noticed he needed help. The rule was, he had to ask for it first, even if he took a long time. Otherwise he got mad.

Crispin arrived at the bottom all covered in bark. "Let's go swimming first," he said, so they did that. On the way home, they discovered Crispin's little sister unattended, so they borrowed her to make a pageant wagon of Queen Diane Going to War with the garden wheelbarrow and the one-horned goat, which didn't turn out as well as they'd hoped, although that wasn't their fault; if she'd only kept still and not shrieked so loud, nothing would have happened. Nonetheless, it got them both thrashed, and separated for a week. Richard didn't mind that much, as it gave him more time to practice. All that stretching really did help the ache of the beating go away faster, too.

The old man was going back to the city for the winter, where a body could get warm, he said, and the booze, while of lesser quality, was cheaper, if you knew where to go: "Riverside," he said, and Octavia said, "That's a place of last resort."

"No, lady," he gestured at the cottage; "*this* is."

But when she handed him the money, he said, "What's this for?"

"For teaching my son."

He took it, and went his way, just as the apples were ripening to fall. He came back the next year, and the next, and he stayed a little longer each time. He told them he had a niece in Covington, with four daughters ugly as homemade sin. He told them the Northern mountains were so cold your teeth froze and fell out if you didn't keep your mouth shut. And he told them the city

was crazy about a new swordsman, De Maris, who'd perfected a spiraling triple thrust the eye could hardly follow.

"Could you fake it?" Richard asked, and the old man clouted him (and missed). They figured it out together.

Octavia gave him more money when he went. Maybe it was a mistake, because then he didn't come back. The old fellow might have just dropped dead, or been robbed, or he might have spent it all on a tearing binge. It hardly mattered. But she had meant him to buy a sword for Richard with it, and that mattered some.

So she went up to the Trevelyan manor, to see what could be done. Surely, she thought, they had plenty of swords there. Nobles owned swords, even if they didn't duel themselves. There were ritual swordsmen you hired for weddings, and, well, guards and things.

The manor servants knew her, although they didn't like her much. They were all country people, and she was a city girl with a bastard son and some very weird habits. Still, it wasn't their business to keep her from their lord if he wanted to see her. And so she made her best remembered courtesy to Lord Trevelyan, who was at a table in his muniments room doing something he didn't mind being interrupted at. Octavia St Vier was a very pretty woman, even in a sun-faded gown, her hair bundled up in a turban and smudges on both her elbows.

"You've been so kind," she said. "I won't take much of your time. It's about Richard."

"Oh, dear," said Lord Trevelyan good-humoredly. "Has he corrupted Crispin, or has Crispin corrupted him?" She looked at him inquiringly. "Boys do these things, you know," he went on. "It's nobody's fault; it's just a phase. I'm not concerned, and you shouldn't be, either."

"Crispin doesn't really like the sword," she said.

His tutor had taught him about metaphor, but he realized that wasn't what she meant. He also realized that this poor woman knew nothing about boys, and that he should, as his lady wife often told him, have kept his mouth shut.

"Ah, yes," he said. "The sword."

"Richard loves it, though."

"I hear that he shows promise."

"Really?" She said it a little frostily, as her own mother might have done. "Have people been talking about it?"

"Not at all," he hastened to assure her, although it was not true. People did notice Octavia St Vier's rather striking boy—and the drunken swordmaster talked in the village where he got his drink, pretty much nonstop. But he just said, "Crispin's not as subtle as he thinks he is."

"Oh." She smiled. She really was a very pretty woman. The St Viers might be a family of bankers, but they were bankers of good stock and excellent breeding. "Well, would you help me, then?"

"Yes," he said, "of course." It was her eyes; they were the most amazing color. Almost more violet than blue, fringed with heavy dark lashes…

"I'd like a sword, then. For my son. Do you have any old ones you don't need?"

"I can look," he said. He leaned around the table. "I'm so sorry. I don't mean to stare, but you've got a smudge on your elbow. Right there."

"Oh!" she said, when he touched her. His thumb was so large and warm, and, "Oh!" she said again, as she let herself be drawn to him. "I have to tell you, I haven't done this in a very long time."

"Ten years?" he said, and she said, "Fourteen."

"Ah, fourteen, of course. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Yes, he's just turned thirteen. And may I have the sword?"

"You," he said gallantly, "may have anything you wish."

RICHARD'S MOTHER BROUGHT HIM A SWORD. It was a gift, she said, from Lord Trevelyan—but he wasn't to thank him for it; she had already done so, and it would only embarrass him.

Richard did not ask permission to take the sword to show Crispin. It was his sword now, and he could do as he liked with it. He had already polished it with sand and oil, which it badly needed. Truth to tell, Lord Trevelyan had had a hard time laying his hands on a disposable dueling sword. There were battle swords in the old armory, each with a family story attached. There were dress swords for formal occasions, but he knew Octavia would not be content with one of those. Nor should she be. The boy deserved better. For the first time, Trevelyan considered the future of his unusual tenants. Perhaps he should pay to have the boy trained properly, send to the city for a serious swordmaster—or even have the boy sent there to learn. Richard St Vier was already devoted to Crispin. When Crispin came of age, he might have St Vier as his own personal swordsman, to guard him in the city when he took the family seat in Council (a burden Trevelyan would be only too happy to have lifted from him)

to fight his inevitable young man's battles over love and honor there, even to stand guard, wreathed in flowers, someday, at Crispin's wedding. Trevelyan smiled at the thought: a boon companion for his son, a lifelong friend who knew the ways of steel…

Crispin was tying fishing flies. It was his latest passion; one of their tenants was the local expert, and Crispin had taken to haunting his farmhouse with a mix of flattery, threats, and bribes to get him to disclose his secrets one by one.

"Look!" Carefully, Richard brandished his blade, but low to the ground where it couldn't hurt anything. It was not as razor-sharp as a true duelist's would be, but it still had a point, and an edge.

Crispin nodded, but didn't look up. "Steady…" he said around the thread in his mouth, anchored to one finger against his hook. "Wait—" With a needle, he teased at the feather on the hook. "There!" He held up something between an insect and a dead leaf.

"Nice," Richard said.

"So. Let's see." Crispin gently balanced his fly on the table and looked up. "So you finally got a real one. Is it sharp?"

"Not very. Want to practice? I'll tip the point for you, don't worry."

"Not now. I want to fish. It's nearly dusk. The pike will be biting."

"I'll let you use the real sword." It cost Richard something, but he said it. "I'll use the wooden one."

"*No*, I tell you! I've been working all day on my Speckled King. It's now or never. I've got to try it!" Crispin picked up his rod, the fly on its hook reverently cupped in one palm.

"Oh, all right. I'll come with you, then."

Richard slung his heavy sword back in the makeshift hanger at his hip, and followed the lord's son out through the courtyard and down the drive and across the fields to where the river ran sluggish, choked with weeds. The afternoon was perfectly golden. He felt that it was meant for adventure, for challenge, for chasing the sun down wherever it went—not for standing very still and waiting for something small and stupid underwater to be fooled onto the dinner table by a feather and a piece of string. Nevertheless he joined his friend on the riverbank, and watched Crispin expertly cast the line.

It was true that the boys had already corrupted each other, in precisely the way that Crispin's father had meant. It was, for them, just another thing to do with their bodies, like climbing or swimming or running races—and with certain similarities there, as well; they experimented with speed and distance,

and competed with each other. Fishing was serious, though. Richard prepared to wait. He wondered if it would distract Crispin, or the fish, if he practiced just a little, and decided not to chance it. Crispin fussed at the pole, and cast the line again.

Gnats hummed on the water. A dragonfly mated with another.

"Tomorrow," Richard began, and Crispin said, "*Shh!* I think I've got one." He raised the tip of his rod, and his line tightened. Richard watched Crispin's face—the fierce concentration as he pulled, released, tightened the line again, and gave a sudden jerk as his opponent lashed the surface of the water. It was a pike, a big one, with a sharp pointed snout, its jaws snapping with the hook. It struggled against the pull of the line, and Crispin struggled with it as it raised white water and then rose into the air—it looked almost as if the fish were trying to wrestle him into its own element, holding him at the end of the nearly invisible line, coming toward him, going away, dancing on the wind. Finally it spun in, a writhing silver streak of a pike that landed on the grass beside him with a desperate thud, enormous and frantic for breath.

"Ha!" Crispin cried, viewing his prize as it gasped out its life—and "Ha!" Richard cried, as he plunged his blade fiercely into its side, where he figured the heart should be.

The fish lay still, then flopped once more and collapsed. Richard withdrew his blade, a little raggedly, and fish guts leaked out its silver sides.

"Why did you do that?" Crispin said quietly.

"It was dying anyway."

"You ruined it."

"It was a noble opponent," Richard said grandly. "I gave it a merciful death."

"You don't give a fish a merciful death." Crispin's voice was tight with rage. "It's not a deer or a hound or something. It's a *fish*."

"I *know* it's a fish, so what does it matter?"

"Look at it!" Crispin's fists were clenched. "It looks completely stupid now." The pike's fierce mouth, lined with teeth, gaped haplessly, the hook still in it, the feathers of the fly like something it had caught and didn't quite know what to do with.

"Well, I'm sorry, then," said Richard. "But you can still eat it. It's still good."

"I don't *want* it!" Crispin shouted. "You've *ruined* it!"

"Well, at least get your fly back out of it. It's a terrific fly. Really."

"No it's not. It was, but you ruined it. You like to ruin everything, don't you?"

Oh, no, Richard thought. He knew where this was going, and that there was pretty much no stopping it. It didn't even occur to him to walk away; that would only prolong things. He had to stay and see it out.

"Go away," Crispin said. "You're not my friend."

"Yes I am. I was your friend this morning. I'm your friend, still, now."

Crispin kicked the fish. A little goo ran out of its mouth. Its eyes were open. It did look pretty stupid.

"You said you were sorry, but you didn't really mean it."

"Yes I did. I am. I'm sorry I ruined your fish. It's a great fish."

"Prove it, then."

Here it comes, thought Richard. He felt a little involuntary shiver. "How?"

He waited. Crispin was thinking.

The longer Crispin thought, the worse things were. It would be something awful. Would he have to eat the fish raw? He wondered if he could.

"Give me your sword," Crispin said.

"No!" That was too much.

"I'll give it back."

"Swear?"

"If you do as I say. *I* don't want it," Crispin said scornfully. "It's just a beat-up piece of junk."

Richard put his hand on the pommel at his hip. "Swear anyway."

Crispin rolled his eyes, but he swore one of their oaths: "May the Seven Gods eat my liver live if I don't give it back to you. After you've apologized."

"All right, then." Richard drew his blade, and held it out.

"Not that way. You must kneel. Kneel to me, and offer it properly."

He knelt in front of Crispin in the grass, the sword balanced across his two hands. It was heavy this way.

"All right," his friend said.

"Is this enough?"

"For now." Crispin was smiling the unpleasant smile that meant he'd thought of something else. Richard wondered what it was. It was worth staying to find out. His arms ached, but not unbearably.

"Are you going to take it, Crispin, or not?"

"Give it to me."

Richard held it out a little further, and Crispin grasped the hilt. The weight leaving him was like a drink of water on a hot day.

"Now stand up."

He stood.

Solemnly, Crispin leveled the sword at his chest. Richard looked down at the tip of the blade against his shirt. This was hard. It took almost everything he had to hold himself in check, not to fight back.

Crispin nodded.

"You have passed the first test," Crispin intoned. He put the sword aside. Richard hoped it wouldn't get too wet on the grass. The sun was getting lower. But it wasn't dark yet.

"And now, the second. Are you ready?" Richard nodded. "Take off my boot."

He knelt by Crispin's leg and pulled his left boot off the way he'd seen the valet pull off Lord Trevelyan's after the hunt. Crispin steadied himself with a hand on Richard's shoulder, but that was all right; he had to: the whole thing wouldn't work if Crispin fell.

"Now my stocking."

Richard eased the wrinkled stocking off his foot. It smelt not disagreeably of leather, wool, and Crispin himself. "What should I do with it?"

"Put it somewhere you can find it again. This won't take long."

Crispin's bare foot was balanced on his thigh, just above his bent knee. Crispin was like an acrobat, poised for flight. Or if there had been a tree above them, he might have been about to hoist his friend up into its branches for the sweetest fruit. He could see all sorts of possibilities, but Richard knew from rich experience that nothing he could imagine was remotely like what Crispin would say. And, indeed, it was not.

"Now, put your tongue between my toes."

"*What?*"

Crispin said nothing, did nothing. The foot was there. Crispin was there. The words had been spoken. They were never taken back.

The foot was there. Richard bent his head to it.

Something in his body tingled. He didn't like it. It was just a stupid foot. It should have nothing to do with the way he was feeling.

He tasted essence of Crispin. Crispin's fingers were in his hair, holding tight. He moved on to the next toe. The feeling grew. He really hated it, and he really didn't. He didn't seem to have a choice, actually. He was feeling it whether he wanted to or not. It felt more dangerous than anything he'd ever

done, and he didn't hate that, either. He ran his tongue along another toe, and felt Crispin shudder.

"All right," his friend said. "That's enough." But Richard didn't raise his head. "The offense—The offense is purified. The deed is pardoned." Those were the ritual words. Richard should have stopped, but he didn't.

"The deed is—"

Richard went for another toe.

Crispin let himself fall. His bare foot caught Richard on the side of the mouth, but Richard could tell he hadn't meant it to, and let himself fall, too. They rolled on the ground together, struggling against each other for some sort of relief in a fight they didn't know how to win. They pressed their bodies tight against each other, reaching for each other's skin through their clothes, and finally had the sense to tear them off and give each other the release they'd gotten in the past. It felt different this time, more frightening, more uncontrolled, more essential—and more complete, when they had both done, as though they had made an offering to the world they hadn't meant to.

"The offense is purified," Richard breathed into Crispin's ear.

"The deed is pardoned," Crispin whispered to the grass.

They got up and cleaned themselves off, and put their clothing back together, and went home.

The next day, Richard helped his mother clean the loft out. The day after that, Crispin took him riding on a real saddlehorse. They passed through a field with high hedges, but did not dismount to experiment with each other behind them. That particular experiment was over, now. They never spoke of it again.

THE OLD SWORDSMAN CAME BACK at the end of summer, and spent the winter with them. He didn't say much, and he didn't drink much, either. He was yellowish and hollow-eyed, skin slack on his face, hands trembling when he didn't watch them.

Richard showed him his new sword. The old man whistled low. "That's a real old relic, that is. A pride of ages past. Wonder where they dug that up?" He hefted it, made a few passes with surprising speed. "Wasn't junk once. Nice balance. Length's all wrong for you, boy—'smeant for a bigger man. Have to work extra hard now, wontcha?"

He wasn't fun to have around. Some days he never got out of bed, a grubby tangle of blankets and cloaks he huddled in a little too close to the hearth and

its ashes. On what must have been his good days, though, he'd heft his own blade, or the fireplace poker, whichever was nearest, and smack at Richard's leg or his sword, if either was within reach; he'd growl something in the back of his throat, and then simply go at him as if Richard were some kind of demon he needed to vanquish. Eventually he'd calm down, and start criticizing, or explaining. That was worth the wait. But it was hard.

"I've gotten bad," Richard complained, the fifth time of being smacked along his ribs with the flat of the man's blade. He was waking up bruised. "I've forgotten everything you taught me."

"No, you've not." The old man cackled. "You've grown, is what it is. Arms and legs in a whole new place each morning. Trying, ennit?"

"Very." Richard risked a pass, and was rewarded with a touch.

"Move the table," Octavia said absently, standing at it exploring a bat's insides. They had actually left it on the other side of the room some days ago, but she wasn't paying attention.

"Well, don't break anything, then." She might have meant a bowl, or her son's arm—or probably both.

Nothing got broken. Richard grew all that winter. He was getting hair in unaccustomed places. His voice was not reliable. It made him all the more eager to master the sword.

"You'll be a beauty," the man would taunt him, trying to break his concentration while they sparred. "Good thing you know how to use this thing, because you'll be fighting them off with it."

That was good. The last thing he wanted was people pestering him. This fall the goose girl had started following him around, never leaving him alone—and when he ignored her, she actually *threw* things at him, so he gave her a thrashing—a light one—but still, to his surprise, his mother had given *him* one when she heard, to see how he liked it. She said it was for his own good, but he knew that she was just good and angry. She told him he must never, ever lift his hand against a woman or a girl, not even if they were being very irritating. Not even if they struck him first. Because son, she said, soon you will be much stronger than they. You could hurt someone badly without even meaning to. So it won't be fair. And besides, soon you'll be in a position to, ah, to put them at risk—But we'll talk about that next year, shall we?

"What if her brother comes after me?" Village boys had bullied him a lot when he was small.

She gave him the same answer now that she'd given then to such good effect: "Oh, him you can try and kill, if you can."

He didn't see much of Crispin that winter. The snows were unusually deep, and Crispin was at studies of his own. His father had sent to the city for a University man to teach Crispin mathematics and geometry and orthography and things. When he saw his friend, Crispin told Richard that this was unquestionably the worst year of his life so far. And he didn't see why he had to learn all this stuff when he was going to have secretaries and bailiffs to do the important writing and figuring for him—which earned him a clout from his father, who explained that if he didn't know how to do those things for himself, he'd be cheated blind and the whole estate go to wrack and ruin. And no, it wasn't a bit like not studying the sword. Some things were indeed best left to specialists; he wasn't expected to be able to shoe his own mare, either, was he? Next year he was to have Logic, and Rhetoric, and Dancing.

"Stand fast," he told Richard St Vier. "Don't let them teach you to read, whatever they say. Next time she remembers, just tell her you're too busy or something."

"I'll tell her it's bad for my eyesight."

"Whatever it takes. Trust me, it's the beginning of the end."

Crispin was considering running away if things got much worse. But not to the city; that's where all these horrors came from. Maybe he'd jump a boat upriver, if Richard would come with him.

Richard said he'd consider it.

And so they waited till spring.

The old man was better in the spring. He sat out in the sunshine on a bench next to the rain barrel against the wall, like a pea sprout waiting to unfurl in the sun. He dueled Richard up and down the yard, to the terror of the hens, who wouldn't lay for a week. Octavia complained about the chickens, and the old man got all huffy, and said he would go. She was sorry to hurt his feelings, but she was really just as glad to get her cottage back to herself.

They missed him the next year, though. Octavia felt bad, especially as she was pretty sure he must be dead. He couldn't last forever, and he hadn't looked good, even in spring. However, Richard had uncovered the exciting news that Lord Trevelyan's new valet from the city had studied the sword there, as well.

Richard had given up on Crispin as a dueling partner. Crispin said he had too much to study already, and when they had time to do things together, they had better be something fun. Neither of them had to say that Crispin wasn't any kind of match for Richard anymore (except in drill, which even Richard couldn't consider fun).

In an agony of need, Richard plotted how to approach the new valet. Should he be casual, offhand, and only plead if he had to? Or should he abandon all pretense, and simply beg for a lesson?

In the end, it was Lady Trevelyan who decided the matter. Crispin's mother was back from the city, a month early because of an outbreak of fever there, and bored out of her mind. It was her idea to stage a demonstration bout at the Harvest Feast.

By the time Octavia had heard about it, Richard had already gleefully said yes, and it was too late for her to make a fuss about any son of hers displaying himself like a mountebank for the entertainment of people who had nothing better to do than watch other people poking at each other with hypertrophied table knives. It was just as well, really; she had the awful feeling she might have ended up sounding exactly like her mother.

Still, it would have been nice if Hester Trevelyan could have troubled herself to make a courtesy call to explain to Octavia herself that the swords would be tipped, and there would be no First Blood in this duel, the way there was in the city. A mother's heart, after all. Or didn't Lady Trevelyan think she had one? Octavia had Richard's boots resoled, and made sure he had a nice, clean shirt.

Late on the holiday, Octavia braided her hair on top of her head, fixed it with gold pins, and put on her Festival best—not the dress she'd run away in, which had gone to useful patches long ago, but the one she'd stashed to be married in whenever she and her dashing lover got 'round to it: a glittery and flimsy contraption a decade out of date which still fit her perfectly, and made her look like a storybook queen.

When she made her entrance on the Trevelyan grounds, everyone stared. The country folk standing behind the ribbons marking off the fight space sniggered, because they'd never seen anything like it; but Hester Trevelyan, who had worn something very similar at her own coming out ball, looked hard at Richard St Vier's mother. Then she scanned the crowd for Crispin, and called him to her.

"Your friend's mother," she said; "go fetch her—*politely*, Crispin—and tell her she must come and sit with us."

Octavia had been dreading this. She did not want to sit and attempt to make conversation with Hester Trevelyan in front of or with Hester Trevelyan's husband. Still, one must be gracious. She followed Crispin and arranged herself decorously in a chair on the other side of Lady Trevelyan, and smiled and nodded at everything that was said to her, but that was about all.

Hester found the woman very strange, and not at all appealing, lacking, as she'd always suspected, any agreeable conversation. But she put herself out to be affable. It had clearly been a while since Richard St Vier's mother had been in any sort of decent company, and perhaps she was worrying about her son. The woman's eyes kept straying across the yard to where the torches were waiting to be lit around the bonfire, and the Harvest tables all set up.

Usually, Hester explained, her dear friends the Perrys held the swordfight *after* the bonfires had been lit. They also brought dancers down from their Northern estates to perform the traditional horn dance beforehand—and that was thrilling to see. But because once the fires were started (and the Harvest drinking seriously begun, though she didn't actually say that) people got a little wild, they'd thought it best here to begin with the duel while it was still clear daylight. She hoped Mistress St Vier wasn't anxious. Master Thorne, the swordsman valet, was really as gentle as a lamb. She would see.

Octavia had seen Richard running around with Crispin, eating cakes and apples and throwing the cores across the yard at people. She was glad he wasn't nervous. His shirt couldn't be helped; it had been clean when he left the house.

Hester waved a strip of silk at the men with the horns—they were hunting horns, brought into service for a somewhat cracked but nonetheless thrilling fanfare. Richard and Master Thorne entered from opposite sides of the yard.

Master Thorne moved with a smooth elegance Octavia hadn't seen since she'd left the city. He was arrayed—there was no other word for it—arrayed in green satin, or something that shone like it, his breeches without a wrinkle, his shirt immaculate white. He set his jacket aside, and rolled up his sleeves as meticulously as a master chef decorating a cake. It was a treat to watch, the way they folded neatly into place. She stole a glance at Richard, who was both watching the man intently to see if he knew tricks, and fidgeting with impatience. That particular fidget was well known to her.

Crispin had begged to serve as Richard's aide, but Lady Trevelyan had put her foot down; it wouldn't be seemly for the son of the house, not even at Festival. So it was to a footman that Richard handed his sword while he took off his jacket. His mother watched him hesitate a moment before deciding to leave his sleeves as they were. Then he and Thorne advanced to the middle of the field, saluted each other, and began to circle.

It was only a half-circle, really. Richard lunged and struck, and Thorne fell back. People gasped, or clapped, or both.

"Whoops!" said Thorne. "I must have slipped. Shall we try again?"

"Please do!" Lady Trevelyan commanded. She had planned on her entertainment lasting longer than this.

The duelists saluted, and assumed guard. Richard struck Thorne in the chest again.

"Well done!" cried Thorne. He held up one hand for a pause, and then rolled up a fallen sleeve. "You're very quick, my friend. Shall we continue?"

He did not wait for an answer, just went on guard again, and immediately struck at Richard. Richard didn't even parry, he simply stepped out of the way —or so it seemed from the outside. Thorne thrust, and thrust again. Richard sidestepped, parried, parried again, but did not return his blows.

Octavia recognized the drill from her hen yard. He was running Thorne through his paces. He was reading Thorne's vocabulary of the sword, maybe even learning as he went, but it was nothing but a drill to him.

"Stop!" Lord Trevelyan stood up. The fighters turned to him. "Richard, are you going to fight, or just—just—"

"I'm sorry," Richard replied. He turned to his opponent. "Want me to go a little slower, sir?"

Master Thorne turned red. He glared at the boy, shook out his arms, and breathed deep. He passed one sleeve over his face—and then he laughed.

"Yes," he said; "go a little slower, will you? It's Harvest Feast, and the Champions fight for the honor of the house and the virtue of the land. Let's give the people what they came for, shall we?"

The duel was so slow that even Octavia could follow the moves; for the first time she understood what it was her son could do. It was a textbook lesson— but it thrilled the country folk, who'd never seen real swordplay before.

Richard wasn't quite grown up enough to let Thorne beat him. So when Thorne finally tired of showing Richard and the crowd just about everything he knew, he obligingly opened himself for St Vier's final blow.

"How long did you study?" Richard asked Thorne later.

"Oh, just long enough to put on a show. I figured I could get work as a house guard if valeting got thin. Lots of city men do that. It's always good to have a second skill to fall back on."

"So do you think I should learn how to valet?" Richard asked with distaste.

"You?" Thorne shook his head. "Not you."

WHEN RICHARD WAS SIXTEEN, the old man came back.

He could smell fumes from the cottage before he entered and found him in there, peeling potatoes for his mother at the big chestnut table as though he'd never been away.

"Look at this dagger," the old fellow wheezed. "Worn thin as one of the King's own Forest Leaves. Now I peel with it, do I?"

"Use the paring knife." Richard held it out to him.

The old man flinched. "Put that down on the table," he said. "It's bad luck passing a knife hand to hand. Cuts the friendship. Didn't you know that?"

It hadn't been that kind of flinch.

"Want to spar?" Richard asked.

"Spar? With you? Hell, no. I hurt, boy; everything hurts. Everything hurts, and I can hardly see. Spar with you?"

"Oh, come on." Richard felt himself jiggle with impatience. "I'll nail my feet to the turf. We'll only do standing. You can just check my wristwork."

The old man wiped a rheumy red eye. "Told you, I can hardly see."

"You've been chopping onions. What's for supper?"

"Onions. Stew. How the hell should I know? I'm just the servant here. You're the man, St Vier. The man of the house, the man of the hour…"

"Cut it out." Well, he'd smelt it before he came in. There was the tell-tale jug, propped against the chimney piece.

Octavia came in with a fistful of thyme. "There you are, Richard. Look who's dropped by for dinner."

"I didn't come for your cooking, lady," the old man said. "I came for the feast."

"What feast?"

"Don't get out much, do you?" He hawked and spat into the fire. "The whole county's buzzing with it. Thought you'd know. There'll be a feast, after. And alms galore, I shouldn't wonder. And booze."

Octavia pressed her back to the door for support, knowing she'd need it. "What's happened?"

"Your man Trevleyan's on his way out. Thought you'd know."

No one had told them. It was close to autumn; everyone would be busy with the harvest or the hunt; they'd been staying out of the way. True, Lord Trevelyan had been ill for a bit in summer, but last they'd heard, it had passed.

Richard drew a long breath. "He isn't dead now. Maybe it will be all right."

"Maybe," his mother said. She started chopping thyme, thinking, Well, I've still got a long lease on the cottage…Maybe Crispin will take Richard into his service…I wonder if Thorne will stay on…

She handed the old man another onion. "Make yourself useful," she said.

But Richard took it from him. "You're going to slice your thumbs off." The old man's hands were shaking. Richard put the jug into them. "Just drink," Richard said. "I'll cut."

In the morning, very early, he was gone. They found his sword out by the gate, and a horn button in the hedge. Octavia followed her heart to the orchard, expecting to find him lying under the very tree where they had first discovered him passed out with a sword in his hands. But there was nothing there, only a few apples, rotting in the grass.

Three days later, Lord Trevelyan died. The valet, Master Thorne, came himself to the cottage to tell them.

"Should I go see Crispin?" Richard asked.

Thorne fingered the frayed rushes of a chair back. "Maybe. I don't know. He's doing his best, but it's hard on him. Any man grieves when his father passes; but Crispin's Lord Trevelyan now. He's not himself, really; none of them are. The lady's distracted. I didn't know it would be this bad. You never know till it happens, do you?" He sipped the infusion Octavia gave him.

"So should I go now?"

"You might do that." Master Thorne nodded slowly. He looked ten years older. "Yes, go ahead; I'll just sit here for awhile and drink this, if you don't mind."

RICHARD WALKED SOFTLY THROUGH THE HALLS of the Trevelyan manor. He'd known it all his life, but it felt different now. Not the lord's death, exactly—but the effect it had on everyone. The people that he passed were quiet; they barely acknowledged him. The sounds of the hall were all wrong: footsteps in

them too fast or too slow, voices too gentle or too low. Richard felt lost. It was as if the shape of the hall had changed. He closed his eyes.

"What are you doing here?"

Lady Trevelyan stood before him, dressed in black, her long bright hair bound back behind her, falling like a girl's. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and her face had the same pulled look as Master Thorne's.

"I came to see if Crispin was all right." She just stared at him. "I'm Richard St Vier," he said. He wanted to fidget under her gaze. But something about the focus of her stare now kept him still and watchful.

"Yes," she said at last; "I know who you are. The swordsman. That peculiar woman's son." She was grieving, he reminded himself. People were said to go mad with grief. Maybe this was it.

"I'm Crispin's friend," he said.

"Well, you mustn't see him now. He's very busy. You can't see him, really. It's not good. He's Lord Trevelyan now, you know."

He wanted to retort, "I do know." But she felt weirdly dangerous to him, like Crispin on one of his dares. So he just nodded.

"Come with me," she said suddenly. Without waiting for a reply, she turned and walked away. The swirling edge of her black skirt struck his ankle.

Richard followed her down the silent halls. People bowed and curtsied as she passed with him in her wake. She opened the door to a little room, and beckoned him in with her, and shut it behind them.

The walls of the round room were heavy with fabric, dresses hanging on peg after peg.

"My closet," she said. "Old gowns. I was going to sort through them, but now it doesn't matter, does it? I may as well dye them all black, and wear them to shreds."

"They're pretty," he said politely.

She fingered a green and gold dress. "I wore this one to the Halliday Ball. I was going to have it cut down for Melissa…Children grow up so fast, don't they?"

She looked up at him. She was a tiny woman. Crispin's bones hadn't come from her. "Would you like to see me in it?" she asked wistfully.

What kind of a question was that? He licked his lips. He really should go.

A swoosh of icy blue hissed across his skin. "Or do you think this one's better?"

The cold and cloudy thing was in his arms. It smelt metallic.

"That's silk brocade, Richard St Vier. Blush of Dawn, the color's called. It's to remind you of early morning, when you wake up with your lover." She brushed the fabric over his lips. "Thus. Do you like it?"

He looked over at the door. Silk was expensive; he couldn't just drop it on the floor. Maybe there was a hook it went back on—

She followed his gaze to the wall. "Do you like the pink silk better?" She held a new gown up against herself, the glowing pink cloud eclipsing the black of her dress. "This becomes me, don't you think?"

He nodded. His mouth was dry.

"Come closer," she said.

He knew the challenge when he heard it. He took a step toward her.

"Touch me," she said. He knew where he was, now: walking the fallen tree, climbing to the topmost eave…

"Where?"

"Wherever you like."

He put his hand on the side of her face. She turned her head and licked his palm, and he started as if he had been kicked. He hadn't expected that, to feel that again here, now, that dangerous thrill at the base of his spine. He shuddered with the pleasure he did not like.

"Hold me," she said. He put his arms around her. She smelt of lavender, and blown-out candle wicks.

"Be my friend," she whispered across his lips.

"I will," he whispered back.

Lady Trevelyan laughed low, and sighed. She knotted her fingers in his hair, and pulled his head down to her, biting his lips as she kissed him. He shivered, and pressed himself against her. She lifted her inky skirts, and pulled him closer, fingering his breeches. He didn't even know where his own hands were. He didn't know where anything was, except one thing. His heart was slamming with the danger of how much he wanted it. His eyes were closed, and he could hardly breathe. Every time she touched him he tried to think what a terrible thing this was, but it came out completely different: he had to stop thinking entirely, because thinking it was dangerous just made him want it more. She was saying something, but he couldn't hear it. She was helping him, that was what mattered. She was helping him—and then suddenly it was over, and she was shouting:

"You idiot! Pink *peau de soie*—ruined!" She shoved him away. His sight came back. He reached for his breeches, fallen around his knees. "What do

you think you're doing? Who do you think you are?" Her face and neck were flushed, eyes sharp and bright. "You're nobody. You're no one. What are you doing here? Who do you think you are?"

He did up his buttons, stumbled out into the hall.

The door was closed; he couldn't hear her now. He started walking back the way he'd come—or some way, anyway. It wasn't a part of the house he knew.

"Richard!"

Not Crispin. Not now.

"Richard!"

Not now.

"Richard, damn you—you *stand* when I call you!"

Richard stood. He had his back to Crispin; he couldn't look at him now. "What?" he asked. "What do you want?"

"What do I *want*?" Crispin demanded shrilly. "What the hell's wrong with you? What do you think I want?"

"Whatever it is, I don't have it."

"No, you don't, do you?" Crispin said bitterly. "God. I thought you were my friend."

"I guess I'm not, then. I guess I'm not your friend."

Crispin threw a punch at him.

And Richard returned it. He didn't hold back.

It wasn't a fair fight, not really. They'd never been even in this game.

It was, Richard reflected after, a good thing they'd neither of them had swords; but he still left Crispin, Lord Trevelyan, a wheezing mess crumpled on the floor.

Then he went home and told his mother what he'd done.

SHE HAD KNOWN THAT IT WOULD COME SOMEDAY, but this was so much sooner than she'd hoped.

"You have to go, my love," she said. "Trevelyan's dead. His lady won't protect you, and Crispin certainly won't."

Richard nodded. He wanted to say, "It's only Crispin," or "He'll get over it." But Crispin was Trevelyan now.

"Where should I go?" he said instead. He pictured the mountains, where bold men ran with the deer. He pictured another countryside, much like this; another cottage by a stream, or maybe a forest…

“To the city,” his mother said. “It’s the only place that you can lose yourself enough.”

“The city?” He’d never been there. He didn’t know anyone. The house with no air was there, and the place of last resort. But even as he thought it, he felt that curious thrill down his spine, and knew he wanted it, even though he shouldn’t.

“The city,” he said. “Yes.”

“Don’t be frightened,” his mother said.

He said, “I’m not.”

She pulled out the book on Toads, opening to the hollow where the money was. “Here,” she said. “Start with this. You’ll earn more when you get there.”

He did not ask her, “How?” He thought he knew.

Red-Cloak

ELLEN KUSHNER

IT WAS RAINING. They thought they might go out drinking to relieve the tedium, but Alec didn't like getting wet, and said so. Richard shrugged, and executed a quick series of moves against the battered wall of their lodgings with the end of a long, well-polished rapier.

Alec recrossed his legs. "How long are you going to do that?" he said.

The swordsman stopped, to keep from marring the rhythm of his thrusts. "Until the neighbors get home."

Alec sneered. "Since when have you cared about the neighbors' complaints?"

"I don't," the swordsman answered. "But they're noisy. I can't concentrate then. When they arrive, I'm going out. You can come if you like."

Alec sneered again. "And in the meantime, I derive unbounded pleasure from watching you practice?"

"You could go to sleep," Richard said reasonably. "You could go out. Or you could watch. You might learn something."

"I've watched you before," the other man answered smugly. "It doesn't help."

Richard stopped again and looked at him. "I could teach you, you know. You really ought to learn, now that you're living in Riverside, abandoned by God and the City Watch. Your books and scholarship are no help to you here, and I won't always be around. You wouldn't be that bad, if only you'd practice."

Alec laid both feet firmly on the floor. "Well, I am that bad, and I won't practice. Look, it's stopped raining. Let's go out."

It hadn't stopped raining, but they went out anyway.

THE HOODS OF THEIR CLOAKS MUFFLE THEIR FACES as they stalk through the dripping streets. One figure is especially tall; his long limbs seem to amble casually, but a practiced eye will note the tension in their swing. He slouches, indicating that he is not the master swordsman of the two: that is the other, a man just tall of short, lithe, and compactly muscled. The one who resembles a cat is the tall one, Alec, because in this part of the City cats are scraggly and lean. Richard cannot be compared to any animal, even the well-fed sleek cats on the Hill: he is a breed of his own, the City Man, who knows his way through every twisted street, and past most of the people in them.

"It's quiet," said Alec.

"It's early," said his companion.

"Where are we going?"

"I thought to Martha's. It's not too crowded."

"It will be once they hear you're there. Everyone will be trying to buy you a drink." The former scholar grimaced wryly at his friend. "It's a good thing, too; I haven't any money."

"So naturally you assume I haven't either. As it happens, I didn't gamble it all away this afternoon, so I'm flush."

"Don't let on; they'll expect you to treat them all."

"No, they won't," the swordsman said. "I never treat anyone, and they know it."

"And still they love you," Alec mocked. "How do you manage it?"

"They don't love me. They respect me."

"They're afraid of you. I'm not. You'll buy me a drink, won't you?"

"I always do."

And so they pass under a low doorway, into the light and the damp smelly warmth of Martha's little tavern, which is to be distinguished from all other such Riverside establishments only by the names of the owner and the regular clientele.

ALTHOUGH HE VERY MUCH WISHED THEY WOULDN'T, as soon as Richard pushed his sodden hood back from his face every eye in the tavern fixed on him, then fleeted away, while their mouths were busy working: "St Vier…St Vier…" Perhaps he should have gone somewhere closer to home, where people had learned the courtesy of merely nodding and looking away. Alec

smiled broadly, affably on the assembled company. Richard felt for his sword hilt.

"Good evening, all," said Alec. How he managed to make the words sound like a variant of an ever-popular gesture of contempt was a mystery no one could fathom but everyone responded to. Richard's hand closed on the hilt; but there was no one here he really felt like fighting with, so with his free hand he guided his friend to a table in a corner, out of the way of the crowd.

Alec stretched his long legs out under the table. "No one here," he remarked loudly. "As an educated man, I must deplore the lack of stimulating company. Their deficiencies in your line of competence are all too clear, alas for them."

Richard St Vier stifled a smile. "We came for the drink, not the company," he said. "I seem to recall your saying you were dry."

"Dry? What utter nonsense," Alec returned, "it's pouring rain. Must have been someone else."

They drank beer, this being the only drink at Martha's worth the act. Through half-lidded eyes, Alec watched Riverside at work. A youth was divested of his dagger by one of the light-fingered brethren; the women plied their trade, emptying the tavern, early tonight, because of the rain… The usual crowd of people one knew as a genre; no need to pick out individuals. The new arrivals only added to the dampness and intensified the smell of wet wool. When the stranger did appear, he was so quiet that it took a moment before every head in the place turned, and every eye widened.

It took the tongue of Alec to break the awesome silence. "My, my," he said, still reclining in the corner. "Look at the stuff of that cloak. Five groats an ell, easy, that, and three of them must have gone to the dyer. I do admire a man who can dress."

The stranger whirled at the voice from the shadows, his blood-red cloak swirling behind him. Alec waved one long white hand, but didn't get up. The stranger bowed to him, and the taverners caught the glint of gold at his belt, and the dark shine of his boots.

"Lovely," drawled Alec. "A bit outlandish, though. Or have the fashions changed since I was last on the Hill?"

The crowd, turned observers, laughed at that, not imagining that the lanky, shabby young man ever had been there.

"I do not come from the Hill."

The stranger's first words silenced the laughter as an arrow stops a bird in flight. His voice was a thin harsh whisper that carried throughout the room.

"That's all right," Alec consoled; "you're in good company."

Again the crowd laughed. Richard smiled: it was unlike Alec to have a crowd on his side; he hoped he was enjoying it.

"I come," growled the stranger huskily, "from fa-arther than that."

"Indeed," said the young man. "Then you must sit here—shove over, Richard—sit here and tell us all about it. I may not look it, but I am a man of learning, and I admire the well-traveled."

"I may not sit," hissed the stranger.

"Then you'd better be off, sir." Martha spoke up for the first time, anxious to be rid of this peculiar non-customer.

The stranger ignored her. "I have traveled far," he continued in a throat-grating growl. "I may not rest until I find what I seek."

"Poor man," muttered Alec audibly. At last he set his feet on the floor, and ambled over to the standing stranger. Richard, who had always kept both feet firmly where they could be used, leaned forward. "Confidentially," said Alec, "I doubt you'll find it here." He made to put an arm on the red-cloaked shoulder, but the stranger drew away. "In fact," he continued, "there's very little of any worth here at all, excluding my companion and myself."

The crowd wasn't laughing now. My God, thought Richard St Vier, am I going to have to fight them all besides?

"No," said the stranger, "there is not."

Hmm. Richard calculated the odds. If he's with us now that makes three…three to fifteen—well, fifteen and two, actually, unless Martha hefts a tankard, or Alec strangles someone…

"But with the swordsman your companion, I would be glad to hold conference."

"It's St Vier," Alec said blithely. "He doesn't work on contract, and I don't take bribes. But what's the pay? He's expensive, you know."

"Danger," hissed the man. "Perils and horrors such as you may not imagine. Should you survive, you may have your choice of riches and power beyond the dreams of mortal man."

"I doubt it," said Alec. "I am a very expert dreamer. Cash in advance, I'm afraid, though—it *is* St Vier," he added apologetically. "And we've been stumbling around in the dark without candles for three nights, now; you can't imagine the peril and horror of it. Really."

"I know you," hissed the stranger.

"I doubt it," smiled Alec—and flashed one hand out to pull the clasp from the stranger's cloak.

The strange man was all in black, relieved only by the dull glow of gold at waist and neck. His sword was long, and bright as a mirror in the tavern light. Richard wondered fleetingly where Alec's vaunted subtlety had gone; then he was only aware that his friend was safely out of the way of his sword before it met the stranger's.

Riverside fights, even between master swordsmen, are usually played to an accompaniment of shouts, bets, and private tussles from the onlookers. But the only sounds to be heard in the crowded tavern that night were the bump and rustle of the fighters' feet on the packed dirt floor, their irregular breaths—the black man's soft, hissing; Richard's quick gasps—and the swords: talking, quarreling in a furious steel whisper that clashed and rang its way to a shout, and then was silent as the swordsmen circled one another, measuring and feinting, until the swords cried out again. From the circle of rapt onlookers came only the occasional creak of boots or rustle of skirt as someone shifted in place. Once, the fighters came too close to the edge of the ring; a woman shrieked and jumped back, the breeze from Richard's outflung arm fanning her spitcurls.

Even in the cold, hard trial of the fight, the swords never came near where Alec stood, gnawing one knuckle in a show of abstract interest. But the young man's eyes were fixed on Richard, across the room. It was a glorious fight, a rare challenge for the master swordsman; here was the kind of opponent he complained he never could find. And Alec saw the paleness of St Vier's lips, parted, unsmiling.

Even the crowd's rustling stopped when the black man began to fall back before Richard's sword; then they realized what was happening, and a small sigh like the wind ran round the circle. The fighters were too good to

finish in the closed space. Smoothly giving ground, the stranger was allowing St Vier to push him toward the door. The circle broke before them: no one wanted to precede the black man out into the rainy darkness.

The swordsmen passed through the doorway without touching it. The red cloak still lay like a pool of blood in the middle of Martha's floor; Alec considered picking it up, and did not. He looked up to see the crowd frozen in the doorway. Muttering a curse, Alec began to elbow his way through them, when a flare of lightning threw the world into blue relief, and a roar of thunder drowned all sound. In its ringing echoes they heard St Vier cry out.

Alec was first to the door. He nearly collided with Richard coming back in. "Did you kill him?"

"Of course."

"Hurt?"

"Not a scratch. God, it's wet out there."

Martha managed to find an entire cup and some beer to fill it with.

St Vier downed it, and sat on the edge of a fallen bench. An onlooker rushed back in from the rain. "Gone!" he gasped. "He's gone!"

"So's his cloak," Richard observed. "Nimble Willy must have slipped it. And someone must have dragged the body off to a nice dry spot, to pilfer the gold. Good work, here in Riverside."

"They're out of beer," said Alec, "let's go home."

HOME WAS BLESSEDLY FREE FROM DRIPS, and they burned their last candle.

"You're not saying," said Alec, "what happened when the lightning struck."

"Nothing happened," said Richard. "First I hit, and then it flashed."

"Oh. I thought so. You wouldn't claim another man's victory, much less God's."

"No, it was my touch. Then all I saw was his form, blacker than night against the glare."

Alec looked at him narrowly. "And then he was gone. Was that when you shouted?"

"No," Richard said absently. "Did I shout? I simply came back in."

"You did shout," Alec insisted.

"All right, I shouted. Does it matter? What's bothering you?"

“I touched his cloak,” said Alec, “when he first came in. That street’s too narrow for a carriage, but he was bone dry.”

Richard smiled. “I wondered what had gotten into you. You’re losing your head for Martha’s brew, Alec.”

“I’m not losing my head. And there were flames in his eyes.”

“Reflections.” The swordsman shook out his arms. “I like that—risking my life for your drunken fancies. Pure quarrelsomeness I can abide, but dry cloaks and flaming eyes are a bit much. Can’t you just say you didn’t like him?”

“I didn’t,” said Alec, and they went to bed.

Swordspoint

A Melodrama of Manners

ELLEN KUSHNER

FOR MIMI

who was there from the beginning

Man desires that which is Good.

—PLATO

"We all have flaws," he said,
"and mine is being wicked."

—JAMES THURBER,
The Thirteen Clocks

In the end…everything will be found
to be true of everybody.

—LAWRENCE DURRELL,
Balthazar

chapter I

SNOW WAS FALLING ON RIVERSIDE, great white feather-puffs that veiled the cracks in the façades of its ruined houses; slowly softening the harsh contours of jagged roof and fallen beam. Eaves were rounded with snow, overlapping, embracing, sliding into each other, capping houses all clustered together like a fairy-tale village. Little slopes of snow nestled in the slats of shutters still cozily latched against the night. It dusted the tops of fantastical chimneys that spiraled up from frosted roofs, and it formed white peaks in the ridges of the old coats of arms carved above the doorways. Only here and there a window, its glass long shattered, gaped like a black mouth with broken teeth, sucking snow into its maw.

Let the fairy tale begin on a winter's morning, then, with one drop of blood new-fallen on the ivory snow: a drop as bright as a clear-cut ruby, red as the single spot of claret on the lace cuff. And it therefore follows that evil lurks behind each broken window, scheming malice and enchantment; while behind the latched shutters the good are sleeping their just sleeps at this early hour in Riverside. Soon they will arise to go about their business;

and one, maybe, will be as lovely as the day, armed, as are the good, for a predestined triumph…

BUT THERE IS NO ONE BEHIND the broken windows; only eddies of snow drift across bare floorboards. The owners of the coats of arms have long since abandoned all claims to the houses they crest, and moved up to the Hill, where they can look down on all the city. No king rules them any more, for good or ill. From the Hill, Riverside is a tiny splotch between two riverbanks, an unsavory quarter in a prosperous city. The people who live there now like to think of themselves as evil, but they're really no worse than anyone else. And already this morning more than one drop of blood has been shed.

The blood lies on the snow of a formal winter garden, now trampled and muddy. A man lies dead, the snow filling in the hollows of his eyes, while another man is twisted up, grunting, sweating frog-ponds on the frozen earth, waiting for someone to come and help him. The hero of this little tableau has just vaulted the garden wall and is running like mad into the darkness while the darkness lasts.

THE FALLING SNOW MADE IT HARD for him to see. The fight hadn't badly winded him, but he was hot and sweaty, and he could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He ignored it, making for Riverside, where no one was likely to follow him.

He could have stayed, if he'd wanted to. The swordfight had been very impressive, and the party guests had been well entertained. The winter garden party and its outcome would be talked about for weeks. But if he stayed, the swordsman knew that he would be offered wine, and rich pastry, and asked boring questions about his technique, and difficult questions about who had arranged the fight. He ran on.

Under his cloak, his shirt was spattered with blood, and the Watch would want to know what he was doing up on the Hill at this hour. It was their right to know; but his profession forbade him to answer, so he dodged around corners and caught his breath in doorways until he'd left the splendors of the Hill behind, working his way down through the city. It was breaking dawn when he came to the river, flowing murky green under the Bridge. No one waited there to challenge him, so he set his foot on the

stone, plowing through snowdrifts and the messy trails of other late-night workers who'd come before him, until he'd put the river safely between himself and the rest of the city. He stood now in Riverside, where the Watch never dared to come. People knew him here, and wouldn't bother him.

But when he opened the door to his landlady's, there was a considerable crowd assembled, all wanting to know about the fight. Other Riversiders had been on the Hill too, that night, burgling houses and collecting gossip, and already the rumors had begun. The swordsman answered their questions with as much civility as he could muster, suddenly awash with exhaustion. He gave Marie his shirt to wash, and climbed the stairs to his own rooms.

LESS THAN AN HOUR EARLIER, Marie the whore and laundress, who also rented out rooms by the week, had lain snoring lightly in the arms of a dear client, unaware of the impending excitement. Her friend was a sailor turned coiner, whose wooden leg leaned handily against the headboard. He was her fifth and last of the night, and she, not as young as she once was, slept through the initial pounding on her shutters. The sailor stirred uneasily, dreaming of storms. When the knock came harder, Marie bolted up with a cry, then shrieked at the cold outside the blanket.

"Marie! Marie!" The voice through the shutter was muffled but insistent. "Open up and tell us all about it!"

Marie sighed. It must be St Vier again: every time the swordsman got up to something they came to her to find out the details. This time, it was annoying to admit, she didn't know—but then, she didn't have to tell *them* that. With the laugh that had always made her popular, Marie got up and unbolted the door to the house.

Her sailor huddled in a corner of the bed while her friends trooped in, taking over the room with the ease of familiarity. It was the right room for socializing, having been the front parlor when the house was a noble's town house. The cherubs painted on the ceiling were flecked with mold; but most of the laurel-leaf molding still framed the walls, and the fireplace was real marble. Marie's friends spread their wet cloaks out on the gilded escritoire, now missing all its drawers, and over the turquoise velvet chair no one could sit on because of the uncertainty of its legs. Lightfinger Lucie coaxed

the fire to a blaze, and Sam Bonner produced a jug of something that made the sailor feel much better.

"You know," said Sam ponderously, "your St Vier's gone and killed a duke this time."

Sam Bonner was a former pickpocket with an unhandy taste for the bottle. He'd been repeating the same thing for half an hour now, and his friends were getting tired of correcting him. "Not the *duke*, Sam," one of them tried again. "He's *working* for the duke. He killed two *swordsmen*, see, in the duke's garden."

"No, no, in Lord Horn's garden. *Three* swordsmen, I heard," another asserted, "and from a very reliable source. Two dead, one wounded, and I'm taking odds on whether he'll live till morning!"

"Done!"

Marie sat on the bed with the blankets wrapped around her feet, letting the betting and the squabbling swirl around her. "Who's dead?—Lynch—de Maris—Not a scratch on him—Horn's garden—Hired St Vier?—Not St Vier, Lynch—Wounded—Dying—Who's paying St Vier?—Horn—the duke—the devil—How much?—More'n *you'll* ever see—"

More people trickled in, adding to the clamor. "St Vier's been killed—captured—Five to one—"

They barely noticed when another man came in and silently took a place just inside the door. Sam Bonner was roaring, "Well, *I* say he's the best dam' swordsman in the whole dam' city! No, I'm lying—in the world!"

The young man by the doorway smiled, and said, "Excuse me. Marie?"

He was younger than most of them there; dark-haired, of average height, his face dirty and stubbled.

"Who the hell is that?" Sam Bonner growled.

"The best dam' swordsman in the world," Lightfinger Lucie answered with pardonable malice.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the swordsman said to Marie, "but you know how the stains set." He took *off* his cloak, revealing a white shirt ugly with blood. He pulled the shirt over his head, and tossed it into a corner. For a moment the iron tang of blood cut through the smells of whisky and wet wool. "I can pay you next week," he said. "I made some money."

"Oh, that's fine with me," Marie said with offhanded airiness, showing off.

He turned to go, but they stopped him with the shouting of his name: "St Vier!"

"St Vier! Who's dead, then?"

"De Maris," he answered curtly. "And maybe Lynch, by now. Excuse me, please."

No one reached out a hand to stop him as he walked through the door.

THE SMELL OF FRYING FISH made the swordsman's stomach lurch. It was his young gentleman, the University student, wrapped in his scholar's robe, hovering like a black bat over the frying pan in the ornamented fireplace.

"Good morning," St Vier said. "You're up early."

"I'm always up early, Richard." The student didn't turn around. "You're the one who stays out all night killing people." His voice was its usual cool drawl, taunting in its nonchalance. The accent, with its crisp consonants and long vowels, took Richard back to the Hill: for a moment he was once again crouched amid the topiary of the pleasure garden, hearing the same tones ringing on the air from the party guests. "Who was the poor soul this time?"

"Just a couple of swordsmen. It was supposed to be a duel with Hal Lynch, I thought I told you. Our patrons set it up to take place at this crazy garden party of Lord Horn's. Can you imagine, having a party outdoors in this weather?"

"They would have had furs. And admired the landscaping."

"I suppose." While he spoke, the swordsman was cleaning his sword. It was a light, flexible dueling weapon of a sort only he, with his reputation and his reflexes, could carry around Riverside with authority. "Anyway, Lynch got started, and then de Maris popped out of the shrubbery and started coming at me."

"Whatever for?"

Richard sighed. "Who knows? He's Horn's house swordsman; maybe he thought I was attacking his master. Anyway, Lynch stepped aside, and I killed de Maris. He was out of practice," he added, polishing the blade with a soft cloth. "Lynch was good enough, he always has been. But our patrons wanted it past first blood, so I think I killed him. I *think*…" He scowled. "It was a clumsy stroke. I slipped on some old ice."

The young man poked at the fish. "Do you want some?"

"No, thanks. I'm just going to bed."

"Well, it's revolting cold," the scholar said with satisfaction. "I shall have to eat it all myself."

"Do that."

St Vier passed into the adjoining room, which contained a clothes chest that also held his swords, wrapped in oilcloth, and a large, heavily carved bed. He had bought the bed the last time he had any money; seen it in a Riverside market stall full of odds and ends retrieved from the old houses, and fallen in love with it.

He looked at the bed. It did not appear to have been slept in. Curious, he returned to the front room.

"How was your night?" he asked. He noticed the pair of wet boots standing in the corner.

"Fine," the scholar answered, daintily picking bones out of his fish. "I thought you said you were tired."

"Alec," said Richard. "It really isn't safe for you to be going out alone here after dark. People get wild, and not everyone knows who you are yet."

"No one knows who I am." Alec dreamily laced his long fingers in his hair. His hair was fine and leaf-brown, worn down his back in the long tail that was the defiant emblem of University scholars. He had been in Riverside since autumn, and his clothes and his accent were the only signs of where he had come from. "Look." Alec's eyes, turned to the window, were dark and green, like the water under the Bridge. "It's still snowing. You can die in the snow. You're cold, but it doesn't hurt. They say you get warmer and warmer, and then you fall asleep…"

"We can go out later. If anyone is trying to kill you, I'd better know about it."

"Why?"

"I can't let them," the swordsman said; "it would ruin my reputation." He yawned. "I hope at least you had your knife with you."

"I lost it."

"Again? Well, never mind. I can get you another when the money for the fight comes in." St Vier shook out his arms, and flexed them against the wall. "If I don't go to sleep soon, I'm going to start waking up, and then I'll feel rotten for the rest of the day. 'Night, Alec."

"Good night, Richard." The voice was low and amused; of course, it was morning. But he was much too tired to care. He placed his sword within reach of the bed, as he always did. As he drifted off, he seemed to see a series of white images, scenes carved in snow. Frosty gardens, their branches lush with white roses and crystal thorns; ladies with floating spun-sugar hair escorted by ivory gallants; and, for himself, opponents with long bright swords of clear and gleaming ice.

chapter II

BY MIDDAY, MOST OF THE NOBLES ON THE HILL could be counted on to be awake. The Hill sat lordly above the rest of the city, honeycombed with mansions, landscaped lawns, elaborate gates, and private docks on the cleanest part of the river. Its streets had been built expressly wide and smooth enough to accommodate the carriages of nobles, shortly after carriages had been invented. Usually, mornings on the Hill were passed in leisurely exchange of notes written on colored, scented, and folded paper, read and composed in various states of dishabille over cups of rich chocolate and crisp little triangles of toast (all the nourishment that ought to be managed after a night's reveling); but on the morning after the garden duel, with the night's events ripe for comment, no one had the patience to wait for a reply, so the streets were unusually crowded with carriages and pedestrians of rank.

The Duke of Karleigh was gone from the city. From what anyone could discover, the duke had left Lord Horn's party not an hour after the fight,

gone home, ordered up his carriage despite the snow, and departed before dawn for his estates in the south without a word to anyone. The first swordsman who had fought St Vier, a man named Lynch, had died at around ten that morning, so there was no asking him whether Karleigh had hired him for the duel, although the duke's abrupt departure upon Lynch's defeat seemed to confirm that he had. St Vier had disappeared back into Riverside, but whoever had hired him was expected to step forward momentarily to claim the stylish and elegant victory over Karleigh. So far, no one had.

Meanwhile, Lord Horn was certainly making enough of a fuss over the use his gardens had been put to, never mind the loss of his house swordsman, the impetuous de Maris; but that, as Lady Halliday remarked to the Duchess Tremontaine, meant precisely what it was supposed to mean. Horn was doubtless trying to coast on the notoriety that the event had given his otherwise unremarkable party for as long as possible. Both ladies had been there, along with most of the city's great aristocracy, many of whom Karleigh was known to have quarreled with at one time or another.

"At least," said the duchess, tilting her elegant head, "it seems to have rid us of my lord of Karleigh for the rest of the winter. I cannot commend his mysterious opponent too heartily for that service. Odious man. Do you know, Mary, how he insulted me last year? Well, it's just as well you don't; but I assure you I shall never forget it."

Mary, Lady Halliday, smiled at her companion. The two women were seated in the sunny morning room of the Halliday town house, drinking tiny cups of bitter chocolate. Both were clothed in billowing yards of soft, exquisite lace, giving them the look of two goddesses rising from the foam. Their heads, one brown and one silver-fair, were perfectly coiffed, their eyebrows finely plucked. The tips of their fingers, round and smooth, peeped continually through the lace like little pink shells.

"So," the duchess concluded, "it's no wonder someone finally got vexed enough to set St Vier on him."

"Not on *him*, precisely," Mary Halliday amended. "The duke was, after all, warned in time to find himself another swordsman to take the challenge."

"Pity," the duchess growled.

Lady Halliday poured out more chocolate, musing, "I wonder what it was all about. If it had been anything clever or amusing, the quarrel would not be kept such a secret—like poor Lynch's last duel, when Lord Godwin's eldest hired him to fight Monteith's champion over whose mistress was prettier. That was nice; but then, it wasn't to the death."

"Duels are to the death only when one of two things is at stake: power or money."

"What about honor?"

"What do you think honor buys?" the duchess asked cynically.

Lady Halliday was a quiet, shy young woman with none of her friend's fashionable talent for clever chatter. Her voice was generally low, her speech soft—just what men always claimed to want in a woman, but were never actually drawn to in the drawing room. However, her marriage to the widowed Basil, Lord Halliday, a popular city aristocrat, was said to have been a love match, so society was prepared to credit her with hidden depths. She was, in fact, by no means stupid, and if she answered the duchess with ponderous slowness it was only that she was, as was her habit, weighing her words against the thoughts behind them. "I think that *honor* is used to mean so many different things that no one can be sure of what it really is. Certainly young Monteith claimed his honor to be satisfied when Lynch won the fight, while privately Basil told me he thought the whole thing a pointless exercise in scandal."

"That is because young Monteith is an idiot, and your husband is a sensible man," the duchess said firmly. "I imagine Lord Halliday is much more pleased with this fight of Karleigh's; at least it accomplished something practical."

"More than that," said Lady Halliday. Her voice had dropped, and she leaned out a little over the furbelows of lace toward her friend. "He is immensely pleased that Karleigh has left town. You know the Council of Lords elects its head again this spring. Basil wishes to be re-elected."

"And quite rightly," Diane said stoutly. "He is the best Crescent Chancellor the city has had in decades—the best, some say, since the fall of the monarchy, which is generous praise indeed. Surely he expects no difficulty in being re-elected?"

"You are kind. Of course the city loves him…but…" She leaned even closer, her porcelain cup held out of harm's way. "I must tell you. In fact

there is a great deal of difficulty. My lord—Basil—has held the Crescent for three consecutive terms now. But it seems there's a law that no one may hold it for four straight terms."

"Is there?" said the duchess vaguely. "What a shame. Well, I'm sure that won't matter to anyone."

"My lord is hoping to put it to the vote in spring. The entire Council may choose to override the law in the case. But the Duke of Karleigh has been quietly approaching people all winter, reminding them of it, spreading all sorts of nonsense on the danger of too much power in the hands of one nobleman. As though my lord would take that power—as though he *could*, when he expends all his strength just keeping the state together!" Lady Halliday's cup rattled on its saucer; she steadied it and said, "You may see why my lord is pleased that Karleigh's gone, if only for a month or two."

"Yes," the duchess said softly; "I thought he might be."

"But Diane—" Suddenly Lady Halliday seized her hand in an eloquent hissing of lace. "It may not be enough. I am so concerned. He *must* keep the Crescent, he is just beginning to accomplish what he set out to do; to lose it now, even for a term, would be a terrible setback for him and for the city. You hold Tremontaine in your own right, you could vote in Council if you chose…"

"Now, Mary…" Smiling, the duchess disengaged her hand. "You know I never meddle in politics. The late duke would not have wished it."

Whatever further entreaty Lady Halliday might have made was forestalled by the announcement of two more guests, the Godwins, who were shown up with the greatest dispatch.

It was unusual for Lady Godwin to be in town in winter; she was fond of the country and, being past that time of life when social duties required her presence in the city, spent most of her time with her husband overseeing the Godwins' great house and estates at Amberleigh. The responsibility of representing the family's interests in the city and on the Council of Lords fell to Lord Godwin's heir, his only son, Michael. Lord Michael's name was surrounded with the pleasing aura of scandal appropriate to a young noble who did not need to be too careful of what was said about him. He was an exceptionally attractive young man, and knew it. His liaisons were many, but always in good taste; they might be said to be his distinguishing social excess, as he eschewed those of gambling, quarreling, and dress.

Now he escorted his mother into the room, every inch the well-groomed, dutiful son. He had attended parties given by the duchess and by the Hallidays, but was not well enough acquainted himself with either lady to have visited her privately.

His mother was greeting her friends with kisses, all three women using each other's first names. He followed her with a proper bow and kiss of the hand, murmuring their titles. Diane of Tremontaine said over his bent head, "How charming to find a young man willing to call upon ladies at a decent hour and in conventional fashion."

"Barely decent," Mary Halliday amended, "with us still in our morning clothes."

"They are so lovely, you ought never change them," Lydia Godwin was saying to her; and to Diane, "Of course: he was very well brought up—and the city hasn't altered his breeding, whatever his father might say. I can trust you, can't I, Michael?"

"Of course, madam." Automatically he answered the tone of her voice. He had heard nothing since the duchess's comment, acid and piquant. He was surprised that a woman of her stature knew enough about his adventures to be able to make such a pointed remark, and was impressed with her audacity in making it in front of the others. The women were talking now, of the season, of his father's grain estates, as he swept his long-lashed gaze over her. She was beautiful, delicate and fair, with the true aristocrat's fragility that all fashionable city ladies strove to affect. He knew she must be closer to his mother's age than to his own. His mother had allowed herself to run to plumpness. It made her look comfortable; this lady looked entrancing. Suddenly Diane was meeting his look. She held it for a moment, unperturbed, before turning back to his mother and saying, "And now, no doubt, you are disgusted with yourself for having missed Horn's winter ball! I nearly had a headache myself at the last minute, but I'd already had the dress made, and where else is one going to wear white at this time of year? Poor Horn! I've heard that someone is saying that it was he himself who hired *both* swordsmen, just to entertain his guests!"

"Not a very kind 'someone,'" put in Lord Michael, "considering how his house swordsman teamed up with Master Lynch against St Vier—"

"Who still contrived to win!" his mother interrupted. "I do wish I'd seen it. I hear it's harder and harder to hire St Vier to fight for anyone." She

sighed. “Swordsmen are getting so above themselves these days, from what I hear. When I first came to the city, I remember, there was a man named Stirling—one of the richest men on Teviot Street, with a big house and gardens—*he* was a swordsman, one of the greats, and he was paid accordingly. But no one had to *ask* him who he felt like fighting that particular day; you just sent him the money and he did the job.”

“Mother,” Michael teased her. “I never knew you had such a passion for swordplay! Shall I hire you St Vier for your birthday?”

“Now, who will he fight at Amberleigh? Don’t be silly, my darling,” she said fondly, patting his hand.

“Besides,” Lady Halliday said, “chances are good that he doesn’t *do* birthdays.” Her friends looked startled at this pronouncement, coming from her. “Well, you’ve heard the story haven’t you? About Lord Montague and his daughter’s wedding?” To her dismay they said they hadn’t, and she was obliged to begin: “She was his only daughter, you see, so he didn’t mind the expense, he wanted to hire the best swordsman there was to take the part of the guard at the altar…It was only last summer, you *must* have…Oh, well —St Vier had fought for Montague before, so he had the man up to his house—well, in his study, I imagine—to ask him properly, so no one would think there was anything shady going on—you know all you need before a wedding’s people getting jumpy over swords—so Montague offered him the job, purely ceremonial, he wouldn’t even have to *do* anything. And St Vier looked at him, pleasantly enough, Montague told us, and said, ‘Thank you, but I don’t do weddings any more.’”

Lady Godwin shook her head. “Imagine. Stirling did weddings; he did Julia Hetley’s, I remember it. I wanted him to do mine, but he was dead then. I forget who we got instead.”

“My lady,” said Michael, with that impish grin she had always found irresistible, “shall I take up the sword to please you? I could add to the family fortunes.”

“As though they needed adding to,” the duchess said dryly. “I suppose you could save yourself the expense of hiring a swordsman to fight your inevitable romantic quarrels, my lord. But aren’t you a little old to be able to take it up successfully?”

“Diane!” his mother gurgled. This once he was grateful for her quick intercession. He was fighting back a blush, one of the drawbacks of his fair

complexion. The lady was too personal, she presumed upon acquaintance with his mother to mock him…He was not used to women who did not care to please him. "Michael, you are a perfect goose even to think of such a thing, and, Diane, you must not encourage him to quarrel, I'm sure his friends are bad enough. Oh, yes, no doubt Lord Godwin would be delighted to hear of his heir taking up the sword like any common street brawler. We saw to it that you had all the training you needed when you were a boy. You carry a petty-sword nicely, you can dance without catching your legs in it, and that should be enough for any gentleman."

"There's Lord Arlen," Lady Halliday said. "You can't say *he's* not a gentleman."

"Arlen is an eccentric," Lady Godwin said firmly, "and notably old-fashioned. I'm sure no young man of Michael's set would even consider such a thing."

"Surely not, Lydia," the exquisite duchess was saying consolingly. "And Lord Michael a man of such style, too." To his surprise she smiled at him, warmly and directly. "There are men I know who would go to any lengths to annoy their parents. How fortunate you are, Lydia, in having a son you may trust always to do you credit. I am sure he could never be any more serious about taking up the sword than something equally ridiculous…University, for instance."

The talk turned to notorious sons, effectively shutting Michael out from contributing to it. Another time he might have listened avidly and with some amusement as they discussed various of his friends and acquaintances, so that he could store up anecdotes to repeat at card parties. But although no trace of it showed in his pleasant bearing and handsome face, Lord Michael was feeling increasingly sullen, and wondering how he might possibly leave without offending his mother, whom he had promised to accompany on all her calls that day. The company of women, making no effort to include him, made him feel, not so much as if he were a child again —for he had been a very fetching child, and adults had always stopped to notice him—but as though he had wandered into a cluster of foreigners, all chattering with animation in another language; or as though he were a ghost in the room, or a piece of useless and uninteresting furniture. Even the alluring duchess, though clearly not unaware of his interest, failed to be entirely concerned with him. At present, for example, she seemed to be

much more taken with a series of stories his mother was telling about one of his lunatic cousins. Perhaps he might see her again soon, in better circumstances—only to renew the acquaintance, of course; his current lover's possessiveness he found exciting, and was not yet ready to give up.

Finally, they returned to the more interesting question of whether Lord Horn had had anything to do with the fighting in his gardens. Michael was able to say sagely, "Well, I hope the suggestion will not get back to Horn's ears. He's liable to become offended and hire himself another swordsman to take care of the rumormongers."

The duchess's fine eyebrows rose in twin arcs. "Oh? Are you intimately acquainted with the gentleman and his habits?"

"No, madam," he answered, covering his discomfort at her challenge with a show of surprise. "But I know him to *be* a gentleman; I do not think he would readily brook the suggestion that he had intentionally set two swordsmen against one, whether in private quarrel or to please his guests."

"Well, you're probably right there," she conceded; "whether he actually did so or not. Horn has been so careful of his reputation these last few years—he'd probably deny stealing honey if his fingers were caught in the jar. He was much more agreeable when he still had something to occupy his time."

"Surely he is as busy now as any nobleman?" Lady Halliday asked, sure she was missing some vital connection. Lydia Godwin said nothing, but scowled at her knuckles.

"Of course," Diane said generously, "you were not yet come to the city then, Mary. Dear, how gossip will trip us up! You will not know that some years past Lord Horn was the reigning beauty. He managed to capture the eyes of Lord Galing, God rest him, who was at the time gaining power in the Council, but didn't quite know what to do with it all. Horn told him. They were a strong combination for a while, Horn with his ambition, and Galing with his talent. I feared—along with my husband, of course—that Galing would be made Chancellor. But Galing died, not a moment too soon, and Horn's influence has faded. I'm sure it galls him. It's probably why he insists on giving such showy parties. His star has definitely fallen: he lacks the coin for further extravagant purchases. Not, of course, that Lord Halliday would wish for any distracting influence!"

Mary Halliday smiled prettily, her color reflecting the rose ribbons on her cap. Lady Godwin looked up and said a trifle brusquely, "Why is it,

Diane, that you seem to know the single most unpleasant story about everyone in the city?"

"I suppose," she answered blithely, "because there are so many unpleasant people. How right you are to stay at Amberleigh, my dear."

In despair Michael thought: If they start on about the family again, I shall fall off my chair. He said, "I've been thinking, actually, about Karleigh." The duchess favored him with her attention. Her eyes were the frosty silver of winter clouds. He felt a delicate shiver as they brushed over him.

"You are quite sure, then," she said, in a low, melodious voice, "that it was the duke who hired Lynch?" It was as though she had said something quite different, for his ears alone. His lips were lightly parted; and at last he saw, looking at her, his own beauty reflected there. But before he could answer, his mother cried, "Of course it was Karleigh! Why else would he leave town first thing this morning, making no excuses to anyone—unless he left a note for Horn apologizing for the use his garden was put to…"

"Not his style," observed the duchess.

"Then it is clear," Lady Godwin said triumphantly, "that he *had* to get out of the city. His man lost the fight! And St Vier may still be in the pay of his opponent. If Karleigh stayed, he might have to keep hiring other swordsmen to go up against St Vier, until he ran out of money, or talent. And then he'd be up against St Vier himself—and then, you know, he'd surely be dead. The duke doesn't know any more of swordplay than Michael, I'm sure."

"But I am sure," the duchess said, again with that strange double-edged tone, "that Lord Michael would know what to do with it if he did."

Something fluttered at the base of his spine. Resolutely he took control of the conversation. He turned directly to the duchess, speaking assertively, summoning all the confidence of a man used to having his opinions heeded. "As a matter of fact, madam, I am *not* sure that the Duke of Karleigh hired Lynch. I was wondering whether it were not just as likely that he had hired St Vier instead."

"Oh, Michael," said his mother impatiently. "Then why would Karleigh have left town when his man *won*?"

"Because he was still afraid of the person who did hire Lynch."

"Interesting," said the duchess. Her silvery eyes seemed to grow bigger, like a cat's. "And not altogether impossible. Your son, Lydia, would seem to

have a far more complex grasp of the situation than any of us."

Her eyes had turned from him, and the mocking disdain was back in her voice. But he had had her for a moment—had her interest, had her seeing him entirely. He wondered what he had done to lose her.

The door to the morning room opened, and a tall, broad-framed man came in unannounced. A sense of exertion and the outdoors hung about him: his dark hair was ruffled all over his head, and his handsome face was high-colored by the wind. Unlike Michael, with his tight-fitting, pastel costume, this man wore loose, dark clothes, with mud-splashed boots up to his thighs.

Mary Halliday's face transformed with brightness when she saw him. Being a good hostess and a well-mannered woman, she stayed seated amongst her guests; but her bright eyes never left her husband.

Basil, Lord Halliday, Crescent Chancellor of the Council of Lords, bowed to his wife's company, a smile creasing his weathered face.

She spoke to him formally. "My lord! We did not expect you back so soon as this."

His smile deepened with mischief and affection. "I know," he answered, coming to kiss both her hands. "I came home directly, before even going to report to Ferris. I should have remembered that you'd have company."

"Company is delighted to see you," said the Duchess Tremontaine, "although I'm sure Lady Halliday is more so. She wouldn't admit it, but I believe the thought of you riding out to Helmsleigh alone to face a cordon of rebellious weavers unsettled her equilibrium."

Halliday laughed. "I was hardly alone. I took a troop of City Guard with me to impress them."

His wife caught his eyes, asking seriously, "How did it go?"

"Well enough," he answered her. "They have some legitimate complaints. Foreign wool has been driving prices down, and the new tax is hard on the smaller communes. I'll have to take it up with my lord Ferris. I'll tell you all about it, but not till afterward, or the Dragon Chancellor will be annoyed for not having been the first to hear."

Lady Halliday frowned. "I still think Ferris should have gone instead. The Exchequer is his concern."

He sent her a brief glance of warning before saying lightly, "Not at all! What is a mere Dragon Chancellor when compared with the head of the

entire Council of Lords? This way they were flattered, and felt that enough attention was being paid to them. Now, when I send Chris Nevilleson out to take a full report, they'll be nice to him. I think the matter should be settled soon."

"Well, I should think so!" said Lady Godwin. "Imagine some pack of weavers raising their shuttles against a Council order."

Michael laughed, thinking of his friend riding out to Helmsleigh on one of his fine horses. "Poor Chris! Why do you assign him all the most unpleasant tasks, my lord?"

"He volunteers. I believe he wishes to be of service."

"He adores you, Basil," Lady Halliday said brightly. Michael Godwin raised his eyebrows, and the color rushed into her face. "Oh, no! I mean… he admires Lord Halliday…his work…"

"Anyone would," said the duchess comfortably. "I adore him myself. And if I wished to advance to any political power, I should most certainly station myself at his side." Her friend smiled gratefully at her over the rim of the chocolate cup behind which she had taken refuge. And Michael felt, in consternation, that he had just been measured and found wanting. "In fact," the duchess continued blithely, "I have been grieving over how seldom I see him—or any of you—when not surrounded by other admirers. Let us all dine together privately a few weeks from today. You have heard of Steele's fireworks? He's sending them off over the river to celebrate his birthday. It promises to be quite a show. Of course I told him it was the wrong time of year, but he said he couldn't change his birthday to suit the weather, and he has always been uncommonly fond of fireworks. They will entertain the populace, and give the rest of us something to do. So we're all to dust off our summer barges and go out on the river and enjoy ourselves. Mine will certainly hold us all, and I believe my cook can put together a tolerable picnic; if we all dress up warmly it won't be so bad." She turned her charming smile on Basil Halliday. "I shall invite Lord Ferris, my lord, only if you two promise not to spend the whole evening talking politics… and Chris Nevilleson and his sister, I think. Perhaps I had better include a few other young men, to ensure that Lord Michael has someone to talk to."

Michael's flush of embarrassment lasted through the chatter of thanks. He was able to cover it by straightening his hose. A fall of lace cuff brushed his cheek as the duchess stood by his mother saying, "Oh, Lydia, what a

shame, to have to leave town so soon! I hope Lord Michael will be able to represent you at my picnic?" He stopped before he could begin to stammer something out, and simply rose and offered her his seat by his mother. She sank into it with a willow's grace, and looked up at him, smiling. "You will come, will you not, my lord?"

Michael squared his shoulders, sharply aware of the close fit of his jacket, the hang of his sleeves. Her offered hand lay on his like a featherweight, soft, white, and elusively perfumed. He was careful only to brush it with his lips. "Your servant, madam," he murmured, looking straight up into her eyes.

"Such manners." The duchess returned the look. "What a delightful young man. I shall expect you, then."

chapter III

RICHARD ST VIER, THE SWORDSMAN, awoke later that day, in the middle of the afternoon. The house was quiet and the room was cold. He got up and dressed quickly, not bothering to light the bedroom fire.

He stepped softly into the other room, knowing which floorboards were likely to creak. He saw the top of Alec's head, nestled into a burlap-covered chaise longue he was fond of because it had griffins' heads carved into the armrests. Alec had built up the fire and drawn the chair up close to it. Richard thought Alec might be asleep; but then he saw Alec's shoulder shift and heard the crackle of paper as he turned the pages of a book.

Richard limbered up against the wall for a while, then took up a blunt-tipped practice sword and began to attack the chipped plaster wall with it, striking up and down an imaginary line with steady, rhythmic precision. There was a counterattack from the other side of the wall: three blows from a heavy fist caused their remaining flakes of paint to tremble.

"*Will you shut that racket up?*" a voice demanded through the wall.

Richard put his sword down in disgust. "Hell," he said, "they're home."

"Why don't you kill them?" the man in the chair asked lazily.

"What for? Marie'd only replace them with some more. She needs the rent money. At least this bunch doesn't have babies."

"True." One long leg and then another swung out from the chaise to plant themselves on the floor. "It's midafternoon. The snow has stopped. Let's go out."

Richard looked at him. "Anywhere special?"

"The Old Market," said Alec, "might be entertaining. If you're still in the mood, after those other two."

Richard got a heavier sword, and buckled it on. Alec's ideas of "entertaining" were violent. His blood began to race, not unpleasantly. People had learned not to bother him; now they must learn the same about Alec. He followed him into the winter air, which was cold and sharp like a hunting morning.

The streets of Riverside were mostly deserted at this time of day, and a thick snow cover muffled what sounds there were. The oldest houses were built so close together that their eaves almost touched across the street, eaves elaborately carved, throwing shadows onto the last flakes of painted coats of arms on the walls below them. No modem carriage could pass between the houses of Riverside; its people walked, and hid in the twisting byways, and the Watch never followed them there. The nobles drove their well-sprung carriages along the broad, sunlit avenues of the upper city, leaving their ancestors' houses to whomever chose to occupy them. Most would be surprised to know how many still held deeds to Riverside houses; and few would be eager to collect the rent.

Alec sniffed the air. "Bread. Someone's baking bread."

"Are you hungry?"

"I'm always hungry." The young man pulled his scholar's robe tighter around him. Alec was tall, and a little too thin, with none of the

swordsman's well-sprung grace. With the layers of clothes he had piled on underneath the robe, he looked like a badly wrapped package. "Hungry and cold. It's what I came to Riverside for. I got tired of the luxurious splendor of University life. The magnificent meals, the roaring fires in the comfy lecture halls…" A gust of wind whipped powdered snow off a roof and into their faces. Alec cursed with a student's elaborate fluency. "What a stupid place to live! No wonder anyone with any sense left here long ago. The streets are a perfect wind tunnel between the two rivers. It's like asking to be put in cold-storage…I hope they're paying you soon for that idiotic duel, because we're almost out of wood and my fingers are turning blue as it is."

"They're paying me," Richard answered comfortably. "I can pick up the money tomorrow, and buy wood on the way home." Alec had been complaining of the cold since the first ground-frost. He kept their rooms hotter than Richard ever had, and still shivered and wrapped himself in blankets all day. Whatever part of the country he came from, it was probably not the northern mountains, and not the house of a poor man. All evidence so far of Alec's past was circumstantial: things like the fire, and the accent, and his inability to fight, all spoke nobility. But at the same time he had no money, no known people or title, and the University gown hung on his slumped shoulders as though it belonged there. The University was for poor scholars, or clever men hoping to better themselves and acquire posts as secretaries or tutors to the nobility.

Richard said, "Anyway, I thought you won lots of money off Rodge the other night, dicing."

"I did." Alec loosed one edge of his cloak to make sweeping gestures with his right hand. "He won it back from me next night. In fact I owe him money; it's why we're not going to Rosalie's."

"It's all right; he knows I'm good for it."

"He cheats," Alec said. "They all cheat. I don't know how you can cheat with straight dice, but as soon as I find out I'm going to get rich off Rodge and all his smelly little friends."

"Don't," said Richard. "That's for these types, not for you. You don't have to cheat, you're a gentleman."

As soon as it was out he knew it had been the wrong thing to say. He could feel Alec's tension, almost taste the blue coldness of the air between them. But Alec only said, "A gentleman, Richard? What nonsense. I'm just

a poor student who was stupid enough to spend time with my books when I could have been out drinking and learning how to load dice."

"Well," St Vier said equably, "you're certainly making up for it now."

"Aren't I just." Alec smiled with grim pleasure.

The Old Market wasn't old, nor was it properly a market. A square of once-elegant houses had been gutted at the ground floor, so that each house opened at the front. The effect was like a series of little boxed stage sets, each containing a fire and a group of Riversiders crowded around it, their hands stuffed under their armpits or held out to the fire, engaged in what could only loosely be termed marketing: a little dicing, a little flirting, drinking, and trying to sell each other stolen objects, shifting from foot to foot in the cold.

In front of one of them Alec suddenly stopped. "Here," he said. "Let's go in here."

There was nothing to distinguish this one from any of the others. Richard followed him to the fire. Alec's movements were languid, with a studied grace that the swordsman's eye recognized as the burden of feverish tension held in check. Other people noticed it too, though what they made of it was hard to say. Riverside was used to odd-looking people with odd moods. The woman nearest Alec moved nervously away, yielding her proximity to the fire. Across it a short man with a rag twisted around his sandy hair looked up from casting dice.

"Well, look who's here," he said in a soft whine. "Master Scholar." A long gleam of metal slid from his side to his hand. "I thought I told you last night I didn't want to see your face again."

"Stupid face," Alec corrected with airy condescension. "You said you didn't want to see my *stupid* face *around* here again." Someone giggled nervously. People had edged away from the dicer with the drawn sword. Without turning his head the man reached his free hand behind him and caught a small, pretty woman's wrist. He reeled her in to his side like a fish on a line, and held her there, fondling one breast. His eyes above her head dared anyone to react.

"That's good," Alec said with lofty sarcasm. "I used to know a man who could name any card you pulled from the deck without looking."

"That's good." The man mimicked his accent. "Is that what they teach you at University, scholar, card tricks?"

The muscles tautened around Alec's mouth. "They don't teach anyone anything at University. I had to learn to recognize people with duckshit for brains all by myself. But I think I'm pretty good at it, don't you?"

The girl squeaked when her captor's arm crushed her bosom. "You're going to be gone," he growled at Alec, "by the time I count three." Spit flecked the corner of his mouth.

Behind them the voices were murmuring, "Six says he's gone by two…by three…Six says he stays…"

Alec stood where he was, his head cocked back, considering the other down the length of his nose. "One," the man counted. "Two."

"*Move*, you stupid clown!" someone cried. "Brent'll kill you!"

"But I have to stay and help him," Alec said with polite surprise. "You can see he's stuck for the next one. It's 'three,'" he told him kindly. "The one after 'two.'"

Brent flung the girl aside. "Draw," he growled, "if you've got a sword."

The thin man in the scholar's robe raised his eyebrows. "What if I haven't?"

"Well." Brent came slowly around the fire with a swordsman's sure step. "That would be a shame."

He was halfway to the scholar when a bystander spoke up. "My fight," he said clearly, so everyone heard.

Brent looked him over. Another swordsman. Harder to kill, but better for his reputation. "Fine," he purred in his insinuating whine. "I'll take care of you first, and then finish off Mister Scholar, here."

Richard slung his cloak around one arm. A woman near him looked at his face and gasped, "St Vier!" Now the word was out; people were jostling to see; bets were changing. Even as they pressed back to the walls to give the fighters room, the spectators were agitating; a few slipped out to fetch friends to watch the fight. Newcomers crowded across the open house-front.

Richard ignored them all. He was aware of Alec, safe to one side, his eyes wide and bright, his posture negligent.

"There's your third for today," Alec said pleasantly. "Kill him."

Richard began as he usually did, running his opponent through some simple attacks, parrying the counterattack almost absently. It did give the other the chance to assess him as well, but usually that only served to

unnerve them. Brent was quick, with a good swordsman's sixth sense for what was coming next; but his defense was seriously weaker on the left, poor fool. Enough practice on some good drills could have got him over that. Richard pretended he hadn't noticed, and played to his right. Aware that he was being tested, Brent tried to turn the fight so that he led the attack. Richard didn't let him. It flustered Brent; trying harder to gain control, he began to rush his counters, as though by coming in fast enough he could surprise St Vier into defense.

The swords were clashing rapidly now. It was the kind of fight spectators liked best: lots of relentless follow-through, without too much deliberation before each new series of moves. The woman Brent had been holding watched, cursing slowly and methodically under her breath, her fingers knotted together. Others were louder, calling encouragement, bets, and enlightened commentary, filling each other in on the background of the fight.

Through his shield of concentration Richard heard the voices, though not the words they spoke. As the fight went on and he absorbed Brent's habits, he began to see not a personality but a set of obstructions to be removed. His fighting became less playful, more single-minded. It was the one thing knowledgeable spectators faulted him for: once he knew a man he seldom played him out in a show of technique, preferring to finish him off straightaway.

Twice Richard passed up the chance to touch Brent's left arm. He wasn't interested in flesh wounds now. Other swordsmen might have made the cut for the advantage it would have given them; but the hallmark of St Vier's reputation was his ability to kill with one clean death wound. Brent knew he was fighting for his life. Even the onlookers were silent now, listening to the panting men's breath, the scrape of their boots, and the clang of their swords. Over the heavy silence, Alec's voice drawled clearly, "Didn't take long to scare *him*, did it? Told you I could spot them."

Brent froze. Richard beat hard on his blade, to remind him of where he was. Brent's parry was fierce; he nearly touched St Vier's thigh countering, and Richard had to step back. His heel struck rock. He found he was backed against one of the stones surrounding the fire. He hadn't meant to lose that much ground; Alec had distracted him as well. He was already so hot he didn't feel the flames; but he was determined to preserve his boots.

He dug in his back heel, and exchanged swordplay with Brent with his arm alone. He applied force, and nearly twisted the sword out of the other man's grasp. Brent paused, preparing another attack, watching him carefully for his. Richard came in blatantly low on the left, and when Brent moved to his defense St Vier came up over his arm and pierced his throat.

There was a flash of blue as the sword was pulled from the wound. Brent had stiffened bolt upright; now he toppled forward, his severed windpipe wheezing with gushing blood and air. Alec's face was pale, without expression. He looked down at the dying man long and hard, as though burning the sight into his eyes.

Amid the excitement of the fight's consummation, Richard stepped outside to clean his sword, whirling it swiftly in the air so that the blood flew off its surface and onto the snow.

One man came up to Alec. "That was some fight," he said friendlily. "You rig it?"

"Yes."

He indicated the swordsman outside. "You going to tell me that young fellow's really St Vier?"

"Yes."

Alec seemed numbed by the fight, the fever that had driven him sated by the death of his opponent, drugged now to a sluggish peace. But when St Vier came back in he spoke in his usual sardonic tones: "Congratulations. I'll pay you when I'm rich."

There was still one more thing to be done, and Richard did it. "Never mind," he said clearly, for those nearby to hear. "They should know to leave you alone."

He crossed to Alec by the fire, but a tiny woman, the one Brent had held, planted herself in front of him. Her eyes were red, her face pale and blotchy. She stared up at the swordsman and began to stutter furiously.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You owe me!" she exploded at last. "Thhh-that man's ddd-dead and where'll I find another?"

"The same place you found him, I expect."

"What'll I do for mm-money?"

Richard looked her up and down, from her painted eyes to her gaudy stockings, and shrugged. She turned her shoulder in toward his chest and

blinked up at him. “I’m nice,” she squeaked. “I’d work for you.”

Alec sneered at the little woman. “I’d trip over you. We’d keep stepping on you in the dark.”

“Go away,” said Richard. “I’m not a pimp.”

She stamped her small foot. “You bastard! Riverside or no, I’ll have the Watch on you!”

“You’d never go near the Watch,” said Richard, bored. “They’d have you in the Chop before you could open your mouth.” He turned back to his friend. “God, I’m thirsty. Let’s go.”

They got as far as the doorway this time before Richard was stopped by another woman. She was a brilliant redhead of alarming prettiness, her paint expertly applied. Her cloak was of burgundy velvet, artfully draped to hide the worn spot. She placed her fingertips on Richard’s arm, standing closer to him than he generally allowed. “That was superb,” she said with throaty intimacy. “I was so glad I caught the ending.”

“Thank you,” he replied courteously. “I appreciate it.”

“Very good,” she pronounced. “You gave him a fair chance, didn’t keep him on the hook too long.”

“I’ve learned some good tricks by letting them show me what they can do first.”

She smiled warmly at him. “You’re no fool. You’ve got better every year. There’s no stopping you from getting what you want. I could—”

“Excuse me,” Alec interrupted from the depths of boundless ennui, “but who is this?”

The woman turned and swept him with her long lashes. “I’m Ginnie Vandall,” she said huskily. “And you?”

“My name is Alec.” He stared down at the tassels on her hem. “Who pimps for you?”

The carmined lips pressed into a thin line, and the moment for a biting retort came and went. Knowing it was gone, she turned again to Richard, saying solicitously, “My dear, you must be famished.”

He shrugged polite disavowal. “Ginnie,” he asked her, “is Hugo working now?”

She made a practiced moue and looked into his eyes. “Hugo is always working. He’s gone so much I begin to wonder why I stay with him. They adore him on the Hill—too much, I sometimes think.”

"Nobody adores Richard," Alec drawled. "They're always trying to get him killed."

"Hugo's a swordsman," Richard told him. "He's very good. Ginnie, when you see him tell him he was perfectly right about Lynch's right cut. It was very helpful last night."

"I wish I could have seen it."

"So do I. Most of them didn't know what was happening till it was over. Alec, don't you want to eat? Let's go." Briskly he steered a way back onto the street, through the blood-flecked snow. Sam Bonner rolled boozily up and past them, forgetting his objective at the sight of the velvet-clad woman standing abandoned in the doorway.

"Ginnie, lass! How's the prettiest ass in Riverside?"

"Cold," Ginnie Vandall snapped, "you stupid sot."

chapter IV

LORD MICHAEL GODWIN HAD NEVER IMAGINED that he would actually be escaping down a drainpipe, but here it was, the stuff of cheap comedy, clutched in his freezing hands. In fact, all of him was freezing: clever, quick-thinking Olivia, with not a moment to spare, had flung all evidence of his presence—which was to say, his clothes—out of the window, and instructed him to follow. He was wearing only his long white shirt, and, ridiculously, his velvet hat, jeweled and feathered, which he had somehow contrived to snatch off the bedpost at the first knock on the chamber door.

He made a point of not looking down. Above him, the stars shone frosty and remote in the clear sky. They wouldn't dare to twinkle at him, not in the position he was in. His hands were freezing on the lead pipe of the Rossillion town house. He'd remembered it as being covered with ivy; but the latest fashion called for severity and purity of line, so the ivy had been stripped last autumn. Just above his hands Olivia's window glowed temptingly golden. Michael sent out a desolate haze of frosty breath, and began letting himself down.

He ought to be grateful for the escape, he knew that, grumbling as he collected his clothes from the frozen ground, resisting the desire to hop from foot to foot. He shoved his feet into his boots, crumpling the doe-soft leather, even as he still hunted for his stockings. His shaking, hands made it unusually hard to fasten the various catches and laces of a nobleman's evening dress—I should always remember to bring a bodyservant along on these expeditions, he thought whimsically; have him waiting right below the appropriate window with a flask of hot wine and gloves!

Olivia's window was still alight, so Bertram was still there, and doubtless would remain for hours yet. Blessed Olivia! Lord Michael finally managed to squeeze out the benison between chattering teeth. Bertram might have tried to kill him if he'd found him there. Bertram was the jealous type, and Michael had been leading him a dance all evening. He had a moment of panic when he discovered that one of his monogrammed embroidered gloves was missing; he imagined the scene the next day, when Bertram found it perched jauntily among the ailanthus branches under the window: *Hello, my angel, what's this doing here? Oh, heavens, I must have dropped it when I was checking the wind direction…*Then he discovered it, stuffed up one of his voluminous sleeves, Lord knew how it had got there.

As dressed as he was going to be, Michael prepared to disappear. Despite all the wool and brocade he was still shivering; he'd managed to work up quite a sweat upstairs, and the sudden plunge into a winter night had turned it to ice on his skin. He damned Bertram roundly, hoping his turn in hell would be one long slide down a perpetual glacier. A sudden shadow fell over Michael as Olivia's curtains were drawn. Now only one slim arrow of light fell across the powdery lawn, where one curtain stood away from the window. Perhaps Bertram had gone—or perhaps he was still there. Michael smiled ruefully at his own folly, but there it was: one way or the other, he

had to go back up the pipe and find out what was happening in Olivia's room.

It was much easier climbing with gloves on, and the soles of his soft boots adhered nicely to the pipe. He was even quite warm by the time he reached the tiny balcony outside the window. He rested there, grinning with exertion, trying to breathe quietly. He heard a hum of voices inside, so Bertram hadn't left yet. Michael edged closer to the window, tilted his velvet cap to one side, and one of the voices became distinct:

"—so I asked myself, why do we dream at all? Or isn't there some way of controlling it? Maybe if we got someone *else* to repeat the same thing over and over, as we were falling asleep…"

The voice, low and passionate with just the hint of a whine, was Bertram's. A lighter voice made answer, but Michael couldn't catch Olivia's words; she must be facing away from the window. Bertram said, "Don't be ridiculous! Food has nothing to do with it, that's only a scare put about by physicians. Anyway, I know you had a light supper. Did you pass a pleasant evening?" Olivia's reply ended on a rising intonation. "No," said Bertram rather savagely. "No, he wasn't there. Frankly, I'm disgusted; I wasted hours in a cavernous room that felt like an ice cave and smelt like a barn, because I thought he would be. He *told* me he would be."

Olivia made soothing noises. Michael's chapped lips quirked helplessly into a smile. Poor Bertram! He pressed his dripping nose with the back of his hand. He was probably going to catch a cold from all this, which would not only serve him right, but also provide a convenient excuse for his absence from his usual haunts that night. Prophetically, Bertram was saying, "Of course he'll have some excuse, he always does. Sometimes I wonder whether he isn't off with someone else." More soothing noises. "Well, you *know* his reputation. I don't know why I bother, sometimes…"

Suddenly, Olivia's voice came strikingly clear. "You bother because he's beautiful, and because he appreciates you as none of the others have."

"He's clever," Bertram said gruffly. "I'm not sure it's the same thing. And you, my dear," he said gallantly, both of them near the window now, two long dark silhouettes staining the curtains, "are both beautiful and clever."

"Appreciative," Olivia amended. And then, more softly, so that Michael had to guess at all the words, "and not quite beautiful enough."

Bertram's voice grew at once less distinct and louder; he must have turned away, but was practically shouting, "I won't have you blaming yourself for that! We've been over this before, Olivia; it's not your fault and I don't want to hear you talking like that!"

It had all the marks of an old argument. "Don't tell me that, tell your father!" Her well-bred voice retained its rounded tones, but the pitch was shriller, the tempo faster, carrying through the glass with no difficulty. "He's been waiting six years for an heir! He'd have made you divorce me by now if it wasn't for the dowry!"

"Olivia—"

"Lucy has five children! Five!! Davenant can keep his bedroom full of boys, nobody cares, because he does his duty by her…but you—"

"Olivia, stop it!"

"You—where is your heir going to come from? Michael Godwin? Well it's going to have to come from Michael Godwin because we know it isn't going to come from anywhere else!"

Oh, god, thought Michael, hands pressed to his mouth; *And there he is out on the balcony*…He looked longingly at the ground, not at all sure now that he could manipulate the drainpipe again. He was stiff and chilled from crouching there in one position. But he had to get out of there. He didn't want to hear any more of this.

For the third time that night he hooked his legs around the drain-pipe of the Rossillion town house, and began to work his way down it. The pipe seemed slipperier this time, perhaps smoothed from his earlier passings. He felt himself losing his grip, imagined falling the ten feet into the shrubbery…His upper lip prickled with sweat as he eased his grip to hunt for surer anchor—and one booted foot swung wildly out, and collided with a window shutter in a desperate rattle and a conclusive thump, shattering the stillness of the winter night.

He thought of shouting, "It's only a rabbit!" His feet hit the ground achingly flat, and he staggered to his knees in the low bushes. A dog was barking frantically inside the house. He wondered if he could make it to the front gate in time to pretend that he had just been passing by and heard the noise…but the front gate would already be locked at this hour, his feet remembered, making with all speed for the orchard wall, which Bertram had mentioned needed repairing.

The dog's bark rang crystalline in the cold air. Past the skeletons of pear trees Michael saw a dip in the wall, surmounted by crumbling mortar. It wasn't that high, just about at eye level. He flung himself at it arms first, to pull his body over—and the mortar gave way, crumbling beneath him as he slipped neatly over it like a salmon over a dam.

The wall was considerably higher on the other side; he had just enough time to wonder when he was going to stop falling before he hit the ground, and rolled the rest of the way down the embankment to the street, where he was nearly run over by a carriage.

The carriage stopped, its horses registering protest. From within a furious voice, male, shouted out fierce expletives and demands to know what was going on. Michael rose to his feet, fishing for a coin to fling at the driver so they could both be on their ways. But the occupant of the carriage, too impatient to wait for an answer, chose that moment to step out and investigate.

Michael bowed low, out of politeness and a hopeless desire to hide his face. It was his mother's old friend, Lord Horn, who had kept New Year's with them in the country almost ten years ago, when Michael was only fifteen. Heedless of his driver's sputters of explanation, Horn snapped, "Who's that?"

Over the increasing noise of the barking dog and the men's voices on the other side of the wall, Michael said as clearly as he could, "I'm Michael Godwin. I was walking home, and I fell in the street." He swayed slightly. "Might I—"

"Get in," Horn ordered. On shaking legs he hastened to obey. "I'll take you to my house," said Horn, slamming shut the door, "it's closer. John—drive on!"

The inside of Lord Horn's carriage was dark and close. For a while their breaths still steamed white. Michael watched his own with weird detachment as it emerged in rapid little puffs from his mouth, like a child's drawing of smoke coming out of a chimney. As the chill left him, for some reason he started to shake.

"Not the night to pick for walking home," Horn said. He handed Michael a little flask of brandy from a pocket in the wall. The exercise of opening and drinking from it steadied him a little. The carriage jogged regularly over the cobbled streets; it had good springs, and the horses were

good. Michael's eyes grew accustomed to the dark, but still all he could see of the man sitting next to him was a pale profile against the window. He remembered Horn when he'd visited Amberleigh, a handsome blond with lazy blue eyes and pale hands. And there was his adolescent's envy of a green coat of crushed velvet with gold braid.

"I hope your mother is well," said Lord Horn. "I was sorry to miss her on her visit to the city."

"Very well," said Michael. "Thank you." He had stopped shaking. The carriage turned into a drive, and pulled up before a shallow flight of steps. Horn helped him out of the carriage and into the house. He had no chance to glimpse the notorious winter gardens in the back.

A fire was already lit in the library. Michael sat in a heavy upholstered chair, while his host rang for hot drink. The firelight brightened Michael's russet hair to polished copper. His eyes were large, his skin still pale with shock. Lord Horn sat down and pulled a low table up between them. He sat with his back to the fire. Horn's features were in shadow, but Michael could discern a high-bridged nose, wide-set eyes under a broad brow. Hair fair and light as swansdown made an aureole about Horn's head. An ornate clock over the mantel ticked the seconds loudly, as though proud of its place. If you did not immediately notice it for its gilded curves and figurines, you could not miss the noise it made. Michael wondered if it would be appropriate to comment on it.

"You've taken your family's seat in Council, haven't you?" Lord Horn asked.

"Yes." To avert the next question Michael explained, "I'm not often there. It's tiresome. I only go when there's some question directly bearing on Amberleigh."

To his relief, the older man smiled. "I always felt the same. Bore. All those gentlemen, and not one pack of cards amongst 'em." Michael grinned. "You have other things to do with your time, I think."

The young man stiffened at the insinuation. "Someone's been telling you tales."

"Not at all." Horn spread one jeweled hand on the table between them. "I have eyes."

Michael wondered if he should let Horn believe that he'd been reeling drunk in the street. He'd be a laughingstock if it got round: that sort of

behavior was for green boys. “I hope,” he said with a convincing and heartfelt sniff, “that I am not getting ill.”

“So do I,” Horn said smoothly; “but pallor becomes you. I see you have your mother’s fine complexion.”

With a jolt, Michael realized what Horn had been trying to do for some time now. Now that he knew it, he became aware of the eyes fixed hotly on him from the shadows. They burned a flush of color into his own face.

“I understand,” said Horn, “how you might be very busy indeed. But one always finds time for the right things, don’t you find?” Mutely, Michael nodded, aware that the betraying firelight was strong on his features. Fortunately Horn slid his hands to the arms of his chair and rose to stand before the fire, his back to Michael. Now, for the first time since his drop from the drainpipe, he let himself think of Olivia.

He’d always felt sorry for Bertram’s wife. She was a beautiful woman. Bertram was fool to ignore her as he did. Michael liked Bertram, with his strange ideas and fierce possessiveness. But he didn’t think he’d like to be married to him. When Olivia had approached him with her awkward, naive flirtation, Michael had been flattered, for her reputation was chaste. He’d believed then that she had read his sympathy and attraction to her, and was responding in kind. He’d believed, as he was touching her with his expert hands, kissing her white throat and being so careful not to put her in danger, while she made caution almost impossible with her moans and digging fingers, he’d believed that she wanted him.

She hadn’t wanted him. His sympathy and desire, all his tenderness, expertise, and charm, were nothing to her, only made her job easier. She hadn’t wanted him, she had used him for his sex to get back at her husband and to father an heir.

Horn wanted him: for his youth, his beauty, his ability to please and be pleased. Horn should have him.

He came up behind Lord Horn, sliding his hands onto the man’s shoulders. Horn took his hands and seemed to wait. Touched by the formality of their moves, Michael turned him in his arms and kissed his mouth. He tasted spices. The man had been chewing fennel seeds for his breath. The expert tongue flicked eagerly. Michael pressed closer. “Lydia’s eldest,” Horn murmured. “You *have* grown up.” With nothing between

them but the costly fabric of their clothes, Michael felt the man's need, twin to his own. Over the roar of blood he heard the ticking of the clock.

A polite knock broke them apart like a nutshell. A roaring breath of mixed lust and annoyance tore through Horn's flared nostrils. "Come in!" he called gruffly. The door opened to a liveried servant carrying a tray with steaming mugs; behind him another bore two branched candelabra, fully lit. Horn stepped forward irritably to hasten their office, and the light caught him full in the face like a mailed fist.

For a moment, Michael could only stare. Slackness had invaded the carefully tended skin, blurring the fineness of Lord Horn's features. Little folds hung like someone else's laundry from the sharp lines of his face. What had been uniform ivory skin was turning sallow, except where blood vessels had broken along his cheeks and the sides of his nose. His blue eyes had faded, and even the luster of his hair was dimmed like old summer grass.

Michael gasped, and choked on his breath. The handsome man in the green velvet coat was gone, swept back to his youth in his mother's garden. Olivia had thrust him into the arms of this revolting stranger. The mug shook so badly in Michael's hands that hot punch spilled over his knuckles onto the carpet. "I'm sorry—terribly sorry."

"Never mind," Horn growled, still annoyed at the interruption, "sit down."

Michael sat, paying close attention to his hands.

"I was with the Duchess Tremontaine," Horn was saying in a loud voice meant for the servants. It would not do to be caught hurrying them. "Charming woman. She extends me such courtesy. Of course I was a close friend of the late duke's. A very close friend. I am to dine with her on her barge next week, when Steele sends up his fireworks."

The liquor, and the effortless inanity of the conversation, were soothing Michael. "Are you?" he replied, and was shocked at the weakness of his voice. "So am I."

The servants finally bowed out. Horn said, "Perhaps we are destined to become better acquainted, then," his voice heavy with innuendo.

Michael sneezed violently. It was timely but unintentional. He found himself genuinely relieved to realize that he really did feel horrible. His head ached, and he was going to sneeze again. "I think," he said, "that I had better go home."

"Oh, surely not," said Horn. "I can offer you hospitality overnight."

"No, really," said Michael, as miserably as he could. "I can see I'm going to be no fit company for anyone tonight." He coughed, praying that Horn's persistence would not outlast his courtesy.

"Pity," said Lord Horn, flicking an invisible bit of thread from his coat into the fire. "Shall I order you up the carriage, then?"

"Oh, please no, don't bother. I'm just a few streets away."

"A torchman, then? It wouldn't do to have you falling again."

"Yes, thank you."

His wet overclothes were brought steaming from the drying fire. At least the water was warm. He walked home, tipped the torchman, and climbed the stairs to his bedroom with a candle, leaving his clothes in piles on the floor for his servants to find. Michael slipped between cold sheets in a heavy bedgown, a handkerchief balled in his fist, and waited for sleep to overcome him.

chapter V

THE NEXT DAY CAME COLD AND SULLEN. Layers of grey cloud blanketed the sky. From Riverside the effect was oppressive: the river roiled yellow and grey between the banks, swirling darkly about the struts of the bridge. Above it stretched the city's warehouses and commercial buildings, interrupted only by patches of dirty snow. Richard St Vier got up early and put on his best clothes: he had an appointment in the city to pick up the second half of his payment for the Lynch fight. It was a substantial amount,

which only he could be sure of carrying back into Riverside unscathed. He was to meet someone, probably the servant of the agent of the banker of the noble who'd hired him, in a neutral place where the money could be handed over. Both St Vier and his patrons appreciated the formalities of discretion in these matters.

From the Hill the view was quite another matter. The distant rivers glittered, and houses sent up cozy trails of smoke. The sky stretched out forever in rippling layers of silver, pewter, and iron, over the domes of the Council Hall, the University walls and ancient Cathedral towers, on across the eastern plain and into the tiny hills.

Michael Godwin awoke at noon, having slept a round twelve hours, feeling remarkably fit. He coughed experimentally, and felt his throat, but the cold that last night had threatened to overwhelm him seemed to have vanished.

Just then his manservant came in to rouse him. Michael had forgotten his promise to dine with his friend Tom Berowne that afternoon. There was just enough time to dress and wash. His dry, clean, nicely pressed clothes felt remarkably luxurious after last night's escapades. He put the memory behind him and went whistling out of the door.

Dinner was predictably excellent. His friend's cook was legendary, and Lord Thomas was full of gossip. Some of it, gratifyingly, was about him. Bertram, Rossillion's son, had lost thirty royals gambling in a popular club last night, and as he left the table had been heard to damn Michael Godwin.

Michael shrugged angelically. "I wasn't even there. Felt a cold coming on, and stayed in all evening with a hot brick. Oh, much better now, thanks. Poor Bertram!"

He was in no hurry to get home. There might be a note waiting from Bertram, or, worse yet, one from Lord Horn. What a lot of trouble from one night! Of course he would run into Bertram sooner or later. Better make it sooner and turn up at the club tonight after supper. He could tell Bertram pretty stories, and take him home with him. Horn, on the other hand… hadn't he mentioned the duchess's barge supper next week? It was too bad, but maybe he'd better miss that one. Horn didn't have the air of a man who knew when to give up. But the image of the duchess intruded itself between Michael and his resolves: her silvery eyes, her cool hand…and the voice

that mocked and possessed and promised. Perdition take Horn. He couldn't refuse her invitation!

To draw out his walk Michael chose the distracting route home, along Lassiter's Row, where elegant merchandise was displayed before each shop to tempt the wealthy pedestrian. But there was little to distract today. Although the snow had been cleared, merchants were leery of setting much out in the cold, and few people were out walking. His thoughts turned again to the duchess. He'd never heard of her taking any lovers; but she was beautiful, a widow…he should have asked Tom whether there were any rumors…Michael stopped, half meaning to turn around and return to his friend's, when an odd sight caught his attention.

A man was being ushered out of Felman's Bookshop by old Felman himself with the kind of pomp usually reserved for nobles with enormous libraries. But the man enjoying these favors hardly looked like a book collector. He was young, athletically restless, anxious to depart. No noble of breeding would show such ill ease before servile homage, however gross; and no noble would be caught out in a pair of such undistinguished boots, topped by a brown cloak of old-fashioned cut whose edges verged on the shabby.

Michael let the stranger make his escape before he descended on the bookseller.

Felman nodded and smiled, agreeing that, no, it was not the sort of fellow you'd expect to find in his establishment. "My lord will scarcely credit it to hear who that was. That was the swordsman St Vier, sir, purchasing a volume here."

"Well!" Michael was properly astonished. "What did he buy?"

"What *did* he buy…?" Felman ran pink fingers through the remains of his hair. "I offered him many fine illustrated volumes, sir, such as might be suitable, for I like to think I know how to mate each customer to the appropriate work; well, sir, you will scarcely credit what he *did* buy: a scholarly volume, sir, On *the Causes of Nature*, which is in great demand at the University, being the subject of much discourse these days, I might even say disagreement. I only had the one volume, sir, very handsomely bound indeed; if you would like to order another I can oblige, although the binding will of course take some time…"

"Thank you," Michael said automatically, making his excuses as he headed for the door. Hurried by an impulse he did not quite understand, he went down the street after the swordsman.

Lord Michael caught sight of the swordsman a few streets down, and hailed the brown cloak imperiously: "Sir!"

St Vier looked quickly around, and kept walking. Michael broke into a run. As his footsteps neared, the swordsman was suddenly against the wall with his cloak flung back, hand gripping his sword. It was not the sword a gentleman would wear, but a heavy, undecorated weapon whose stroke would almost surely kill. Michael skidded to a halt in the slush. He was glad no one was there to see this.

"My—Master St Vier," he panted. "I wondered if—if I might speak with you."

The swordsman's eyes were, incongruously, the deep lavender color of spring hyacinths. They raked Michael up and down.

The man hadn't dropped his guard; his hand still held the pommel of his ugly sword. Michael wondered what on earth he was doing with this fellow. Something of his mother's complacent laughter and the duchess's piquant scorn moved him closer to the swordsman. They thought he would have nothing to do with the profession. His mother was sure of it; and something in the duchess seemed to despise him for it.

St Vier seemed satisfied with what he saw; his hand relaxed as he became briskly businesslike. "Do you want to talk out here?"

"Of course not," Michael said. If he wanted to talk to the man, of course he would have to take him somewhere. "Why don't you go along with me to the Blue Parrot for some chocolate?"

Why don't you go along…He sounded as though he were talking to an equal. St Vier seemed not to notice. He nodded, and followed Michael back up the street toward the cafe. Michael had to lengthen his stride to match the swordsman's. The man's presence was very *vivid*, at once sensual and aesthetic, like a fine blood-horse. He didn't match Michael's idea of a swordsman: there seemed nothing coarse about him, or surly, or even humorless.

"I'd better say now that my fees are high," St Vier said. "I don't want to put you off, but it usually has to be something pretty serious."

"Yes, I've heard." Michael wondered if he realized just how extensively his fees were discussed on the Hill. "But I don't really want anyone challenged right now."

"No?" St Vier stopped walking abruptly. "If it's not about a job, then what do you want?"

He seemed less curious than annoyed. Quickly Michael said, "Of course, I'm willing to pay you for your time, at your usual rates. I'd like you to…I'd like to learn the sword from you."

The swordman's face closed with indifference. Later, Michael realized it was the same bored, impatient look he had been giving Felman. "I don't teach," was all he said.

"Please believe that I'm in earnest." What was he saying? He had never been anything of the kind. But the words came spilling out: "I realize it's an unusual proposition, but I would make sure that you were properly recompensed as befits your skill and reputation."

Barely concealed distaste showed on the swordman's face. "I'm sorry," he said, "I don't have time for this."

"Wait—" Michael stopped him from turning on his heel. "Is there anything I could do to…"

For the first time St Vier seemed to soften, looking at Michael as though he saw a person behind the massed signals of breeding and grooming. "Look," he said kindly, "I'm not a teacher. It has nothing to do with you. If you want to learn, there are plenty of others in the city who will teach you. I only do my own work; you can reach me in Riverside if you want me for that."

"Will you…?" Courteously Michael indicated the cafe a few doors down, determined to salvage some dignity.

The swordsman actually smiled at him. There was charm in it, unlooked-for humor and understanding. "Thank you, no. I'm really in a hurry to get home."

"Thank you, then; and good luck." He didn't know if that was the appropriate thing to wish a swordsman, but the man didn't seem to take offense. It occurred to Michael later that St Vier had never asked him his name; and he never found out what the book was for. But he made inquiries that day, and the next, until he finally found himself a teacher.

ALEC WAS MENDING A SOCK. His hands were bathed with the grey light from the window, and his stitches were tiny and careful.

"You should let Marie do that," Richard said, hiding his surprise.

"It's a skill I learned at University. I don't want to lose it. I might need to earn a living some day."

Richard laughed, "As a tailor? Look, get yourself some new socks; get yourself ten pairs, get them in silk. I've just been paid for the Lynch job. We're going to be very comfortable, as long as it lasts."

"Good," Alec grumbled. "We need more candles."

"Beeswax," said Richard giddily, "of course. The best there is. Look, I've been shopping uptown." He took out a brown paper parcel and held it out to Alec. "A present. For you."

"What is it?" Alec made no move to take the package.

"Well, it's a book," Richard said, still holding it. "I thought you might like it."

Alec's eyes widened; then he converted the expression into a raising of the eyebrows. He fussed with the sock. "You idiot," he said softly.

"Well, you've only got the three you brought with you. And they're almost worn out. I thought you might like something new." Feeling a little awkward, he began undoing the brown paper himself. It released the rich smell of leather. The binding alone, Richard thought, was worth the price: burgundy leather with gold tooling, gilt-edged pages; the book was as beautiful as a rug or a painting.

Alec's arm shot out: his hand closed on the book. "Felman's!" he gasped. "You got this at Felman's!"

"Well, yes. He's supposed to be good."

"Good…" Alec said in strangled tones. "Richard, it's…he's…they're wall decorations for noblemen's libraries. He sells them by the inch: 'Do you have Birdbrain in red leather?' 'No, sir, but I have him in green.' 'Oh, no, that won't go with the rug.' 'Well, sir, I do have this lovely work on the mating habits of chickens in red. It's about the same size.' 'Oh, good, I'll take that one.'"

Richard laughed. "Well, it is beautiful."

"Very," Alec said dryly. "You could wear it to Chapel. I don't suppose you know what it's about?"

"Natural philosophy," he responded promptly, "whatever that is. The man said you might like it. He seemed to know what he was talking about. I could have got you *The Wicked Uncle, or, True Love Rewarded* or *The Merry Huntsman's Guide to Autumn Deer Droppings*. But he said this was what everyone was reading now."

"Everyone where?" Alec's voice was stiff, the Hill accent pronounced.

"At University."

Alec went to the window, placing his long palm against the cold glass. "And you thought I would be interested."

"I thought you might be. I told him you went there, to the University."

"But not that I'd left."

"It was none of his business. I had to tell him something: when he thought it was for me he tried to sell me a book of pornographic woodcuts."

"At least they would have been of some use to you," Alec said acidly. "On *the Causes of Nature*—the new translation. They've just lifted the ban on it after fifteen years. Have you any idea—no, of course you haven't."

With a languid motion he turned from the window. The glass was freshly streaked with blood. His palm was scored with the mark of the darning needle.

Richard's breath caught. But he had faced dangerous opponents before. "Come on," he said; "let's go down to Rosalie's and pay off all our debts. I've been drinking on credit for the past six weeks. You can bet gold against Greasepole Mazarene; he'll have hysterics."

"That will be pleasant," Alec remarked, and went to collect his cloak and gloves.

chapter VI

HE'D HAD TUTORS ALL HIS LIFE, Michael realized; men who came to his home and taught him, courteously and slowly, what it was appropriate for him to know. Even when he was eight they were deferential, the University scholars whose best hope for social promotion was as tutors, the masters of their various arts. Suddenly he was glad that St Vier had refused his offer. After a series of discreet inquiries in unusual places, Michael finally lit upon Master Vincent Applethorpe's Academy of Swordsmanship.

For a professional swordsman, the threat of termination is always present. The romantic ideal, of course, is to die fighting, young and still at one's peak. For practical purposes, though, almost any swordsman cherishes the dream that he will live until he first notices his precision slipping, by which time he will have built his reputation high enough to be able to resign gracefully from the active life and be welcomed into the household of some nobleman eager for the prestige his distinguished presence will lend. There he will be required only to do light bodyguarding and to give the occasional lesson to the noble's sons or men-at-arms. The worst thing that can happen—short of being crippled—is to run a school.

Everyone knows that the truly great swordsmen are trained by masters, men who appear out of nowhere, on a country road or in a crowded taproom, to single you out for their exclusive training. Sometimes it is necessary to pursue them from town to town, proving your worthiness until they consent to take you on. Only thugs resort to the schools: common sorts who want an advantage in a street brawl, or to impress a lover; or servants eager to impress an employer for promotion.

The name Vincent Applethorpe was not one that lived in legend.

It should have. Applethorpe had been a brilliant swordsman. In his best days he would have given St Vier a good fight. But his name had been erased from the public lists too early in his career for his last fight to be made a public tragedy. Quite early on, his arm was slashed in a gorgeous, unchancy bit of rapier-and-dagger work. The wound festered, and rather than lose his life he lost his left arm. He very nearly lost both: only the intervention of concerned friends, who carried him to a surgeon's while he was in a drunken stupor of pain and the fear of gangrene, got him under the knife in time to save his life. The choice, for Applethorpe, had not been an easy one. If he had died, he might have been remembered for his early triumphs. Swordsmen appreciate a glorious death. But inglorious examples of what really happens to one whose skill has failed him at the crucial moment, those they prefer to forget.

There has been no great one-armed swordsman since Black Mark of Ariston, who lived two hundred years before Vincent Applethorpe was born. Black Mark's portrait hangs in the halls of Ariston Keep. Sure enough, one sleeve hangs ostentatiously empty. Swordsmen are full of the stories of his exploits. The portrait, however, shows a man of middle age, his hook-beaked face an impressive mass of furrows. And privately they'll admit that you need both arms for balance, sometimes even for the tactical advantage of switching hands. He couldn't have lost that arm until after he'd made his name as a swordsman. But the stories go on getting wilder.

Ironically, Vincent Applethorpe had grown up in the southern hills, within sight of Ariston Keep. He'd never given it much thought, though, until he came home from the city half-dead in the bottom of a wagon. His sister was running the family farm, and he was supposed to be there to help her with it. Instead he took to disappearing frequently on long walks. He went to the Keep, and would stand for hours on a hill above it, watching the people go in and out. He never tried to get into the hall himself, just stood and thought about great one-armed swordsmen. His sister had hoped that he would settle down, marry, and bring another woman into the house. He did wait until after harvest before dashing her hopes and returning to the city.

Enough time had passed, he thought, for his face to have been forgotten. He set up his academy far from swordsmen's haunts, in a large attic above a dry-goods shop. The ceiling sloped in, and it was stifling in

summer, but it provided that rare city commodity, a stretch of unbroken space. After a few years there he could afford to move to a large hall built over a stable at the far eastern edge of town. It had been designed as an indoor riding ring, but the flooring was too weak to bear the weight of many horses. He soon hired a couple of assistants, young men he had trained himself who would never be swordsmen, but knew enough to teach. They could supervise the drills that went on the length of the studio, and keep the straw targets with their red patches in repair. Applethorpe was still the Master. He demonstrated the moves for his students, describing what he could not perform. So, ten years after his accident, at a time when he would have had to begin to consider abandoning the active swordsman's life, he was still in command of his career. And in his demonstrations he retained the fire, the precision of motion, the grace that made every move an explication of the swordsman's art, at once both effortless and imperative.

Michael Godwin admired him with a less than scholarly interest. He could not yet appreciate the technical clarity of Applethorpe's movements, but he was thrilled by the Master's vividness—it was almost a glow he projected when he demonstrated a move. Lord Michael wondered if this was what was meant by "flair." He'd always imagined flair to be tied up in dramatic movements of the arms, one of which the Master lacked. As with St Vier, there was a grace and dignity to his carriage that was neither the deliberate languor of the aristocrat nor the choppy energy of the city tradesman. Michael extended his right arm as instructed, trying for a fluidity that looked easy when Applethorpe did it.

"No," the Master said to the line of beginners hopefully strung out before him like birds on a washline. "You cannot hope to get anywhere near it while you stand like that." His voice was remarkably calm, giving off neither impatience nor annoyance—nor any particular kindness. Seeing students doing something badly never upset Vincent Applethorpe. *He* knew the way it ought to be done. He kept explaining, and eventually they would get it, or they wouldn't. He surveyed the entire line and observed dispassionately but accurately, "You look like you are all waiting to be beaten. Your shoulders are afraid to set upright, and your heads crane forward on your necks. So your whole stance is crooked, and your thrust will be crooked, too—except you. You. What's your name?"

"Michael Godwin," said Lord Michael. He hadn't bothered to change it; there were Godwins all over the country, and no one in this place was likely to know him by sight.

Applethorpe nodded. "The Godwins of Amberleigh?" Michael nodded back, amused that the man had come so close in his lineage and region. Maybe it was the hair. "A handsome family," the Master said. "You're lucky. Extend." Michael did so, clumsily. "No, never mind the wrist for now, just show us the arm. Look, all of you, look at that. The carriage of the shoulders, the lift of the head. It gives the whole extension a natural smoothness. Do it."

He always came to this point in his instruction, when the explication of cause and effect came to an end and his instruction was, "Do it." They tried, fingering Michael with the edges of their eyes, trying to shake their shoulders into place without thrusting out their chests, to lift their heads without ruining their sight lines. Michael stopped worrying about his wrist, and fell into a trance of motion as his arm stretched itself out and pulled back in, over and over. He had never before considered his carriage as especially useful. It was an aid to an effect, handy to show off the line of a coat or the turn of a dance step. Now everything fell into place as the steady movement of his arm rolled through his shoulders.

Applethorpe paused in his round of surveillance and correction. "Good," he said. "Godwin. You've got the wrist now."

AT HOME IN HIS LARGE, AIRY DRESSING ROOM, with the fire lit against the cold, Michael took off his sweaty practice clothes. His manservant bore away the plain, unstylish garments without comment. Other servants brought up the hot water for his bath. He sank gratefully into the tub, whose steam rose up agreeably scented with clove and rose petals. He had time only for a short soak before he must dress for supper. It was the night of the duchess's party, and he had no desire to be late and miss his place on the barge. Even the prospect of Lord Horn's company was not enough to dampen his excitement. He could not imagine needing to converse with anyone else when Diane was present. He had forgotten how hard she was to talk to, and his estimate of his own powers was back to its accustomed level.

Michael rose naked from the bath, to be confronted with his own form, reflected down from the large mirror over the fireplace. He paused, staring, in the act of reaching for the bath towel. He was accustomed to thinking of his shoulders as frail; he had to pad them out sometimes to meet the demands of fashion. Now they seemed trim and competent. His collar bones followed their line, lithe as birds' wings. A gentleman did not uncover his neck in public, so their delights were reserved for his intimates. But in the room above the stable one grew hot, and adopted the open collar of the workman.

He followed the line they pointed to like an arrow, down his chest. All that the world had counted beautiful could be trained, turned on the lathe of practice to become a dangerous weapon. Looking up, he met his own eyes. The dark lashes that framed them made them seem deeper than they were, the pupil a stone dropped into ripples of color blue-green as the sea. He had the sense of being closely examined by a stranger, of falling into his own beautiful eyes. He didn't know the man in the mirror, but he wanted to. The more he stared, the further from himself he went, asking, *Who are you? What do you want?*

His feet were very cold. The floor was like ice, and his stiff body had begun to shiver. Michael grabbed the towel and rubbed himself briskly. He would have to hurry to dress. The fireworks were due to begin at dark over the river, and the barge must not leave without him.

THE DAY HAD BEEN CLEAR, almost mild; but with twilight a chill had struck that deepened as the dark winter sun began to fall, pulling the temperature with it. It hung low over the city's profile, as red as summer raspberries. The Riverside street was strangely empty, as silent as dawn. The slush of the ground had re-formed into frozen crusts, eerie landscapes-in-miniature of ice and mud. Alec's new boots demolished a fairy castle. He skidded on a patch of ice and righted himself, cursing.

"Are you sure you want to see these fireworks?" Richard asked him.

"I love fireworks," Alec answered glibly. "I value them more than life itself."

"The west bank up by Waterbourne will be crowded," St Vier said, "with carriages and upper city folks and vendors. Too many people live there. Half

of Riverside will be over picking pockets. We'd better stay on the east side, it won't be so bad."

"The pickpockets, or the crowds?" said Alec; but he went along with Richard.

They made for the lower bridge, which connected Riverside to the Old City. Some people still lived there, but mainly the east bank was given over to government buildings: the old palace, the castle/fort and barracks… Richard marveled at the foibles of the rich. He had nothing against fireworks. But to require your friends to sit in their barges in the middle of the river late in winter to enjoy them, that seemed eccentric. He felt the cold, the wind cutting across the river, even in his new clothes. He had bought himself a heavy cloak, jacket, and fur-lined gloves. Alec, too, was warmly dressed, and had stopped complaining of the cold. He liked having money to spend, money to waste on food and gambling.

Across the dark breadth of the river the populated section of the city loomed, rising from its banks in steeper and steeper slopes until it became the Hill and blotted out the evening sky. St Vier and Alec had already passed the docks and warehouses, the fort guarding the old river-entrance to the city, and were coming on the Grand Plaza of Jurisdiction, Justice Place, where the Council of Lords had established its hall. Upriver the orange glow of torches from already assembled barges stained the growing darkness. Alec quickened his pace, anxious to catch the first fireworks. Richard had to break into a trot to match his long-legged stride.

Footsteps rang behind them on the frozen stone across the plaza. He heard young men's voices, raised in laughter. One of them called, thin and clear, "Hey! Wait up!" Out of habit St Vier checked out the area. There was no one else they could be calling to. Alec did not look back, nor did he slow his steps.

"Hey!" The callers were insistent. "Wait for us!" Alec kept on walking, but Richard stopped and turned. He saw a small group of boys, all dressed like Alec in black robes, long hair falling down their backs. When he'd chosen this route, he hadn't been thinking how close they'd pass to the University's domains.

Alec's hair streamed out behind him like a comet's tail. Richard ran to catch up. "I can get us out of here if you'd like," he said casually. For reply Alec only looked down at him, and slowed his pace to a deliberate snail's

saunter. The swordsman had no trouble matching it; it reminded him of leg exercises.

The students' shoes whispered closer across the stone, until one of them drew abreast of Alec. "Hey," the student said friendlily, "I thought you were locked up with your books."

Alec stared straight ahead, and didn't stop. Richard's hand was on his sword-hilt. The students seemed unarmed, but Alec could be harmed by many things.

"Hey," said the boy, "aren't you—"

Alec looked down at him, and the student stammered in confusion, "Oh —hey—I thought you were—"

"Think again," said Alec harshly in an odd voice, a Riverside voice that troubled St Vier. It was effective, though; the students clustered together and hurried away, and Richard took his hand from the sword.

chapter VII

THE TREMONTAINE BARGE ROCKED when Lord Michael set his foot on its side; but he had been getting in and out of nobles' barges since he'd come to the city, and had grown proficient at not falling in. A torchman conducted him to the pavilion in the center of the flat-bottomed boat. The hangings were green and gold, the duchess's colors. All of the sides were down while the barge waited at the dock; through the brocade he heard laughter, and the clink of metal. It was one of the most beautiful barges of

any noble on the water. He had always wanted to ride in it. But now that he had the chance his mind was scarcely taking it in.

One corner of the brocade was pulled aside for him to enter the pavilion; the people seated at the table inside gasped and shivered at the blast of cold air that entered with him. Diane's guests were already dining off slices of smoked goose, washed down with a strong red wine that took the chill out of the night and the river. Michael slipped into the only empty seat; he had lingered too long choosing a jacket, and paid the price by being the last to arrive. And his clothes weren't even going to matter, he realized now: no one at the table would remove their outer layer of furs, despite the brazier under the table warming their feet. They looked like a country hunting party, swathed in thick greys and browns and blacks that glowed and rippled like living pelts in the candlelight.

The duchess raised her goblet to him. The curve of her wrist was achingly white even against the white fur of her cuff. Michael's throat tightened, but he replied with a courtesy. His cup was filled with wine the color of rubies. The drink, though cool, was warmer than the air outside had been; he seemed to feel it flowing straight into his veins.

They were all there: young Chris Nevilleson and his sister, Lady Helena, whose ringlets Michael could remember pulling at childhood parties; Mary, Lady Halliday, without her lord, the Crescent Chancellor, who had been detained by city business; Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris, the bright young hope of the Council of Lords, already Dragon Chancellor at the age of thirty-two; and Lord Horn. Horn's fair skin was flushed with warmth. He wore splendid longhaired grey fox. The shadowlight was kind to him, rendering him with a lean, overbred elegance. He wore silver rings, which called attention to his slender hands when he reached for things at table.

He looked at Michael with cool deliberation. It was a look that implied further intimacy, and it made Michael's skin creep. The smile at the edges of his mouth made Michael want to hit him.

The goose and red wine were whisked away, and small bowls of hot almond soup were set down, their contents rocking lightly with the tide. "Oh, dear," said the duchess. "I was afraid of this. We're about to cast off. I hope the river isn't choppy."

"It isn't," said Michael. "The sky is clear, it's perfect fireworks weather."

"Except for the cold." Helena Nevilleson shivered theatrically.

"Pooh," said her brother, "you used to climb out of the window in winter to check on your pony." Lady Helena hit him with her pomander ball.

"My lord," the duchess admonished, "no woman likes to be reminded of her past. Not all of them come as well armed as Lady Helena, though."

"If she's trying to prove what a lady she is now," Horn said primly, "she'd do better to put it away."

"And who," Helena demanded, "will protect me if I do?" The young woman's eyes sparkled with the delight of being the center of attention.

"From what?" asked her brother innocently.

"Why, insult, of course," the duchess defended her.

"With respect, madam Duchess," Lord Christopher answered, "the truth cannot be considered an insult."

"Idealism," murmured Lord Ferris, while Diane responded, "Can it not? That depends on your timing, my lord."

"I had a pony," quiet Lady Halliday spoke up. "It bit me."

"Funny," said Christopher Nevilleson; "Helena's was always afraid *she* would bite it."

"Timing?" asked Michael, emerging from a cold draught of stony white wine. He didn't care much about ponies and pomander balls. Diane had barely looked at him since her initial greeting. He was beginning to strain for the cryptic messages she had been sending him the other day. The party felt so normal that it was making him uncomfortable. To find her again he felt he would have to walk a labyrinth of hidden meanings.

Now, at last, her grey eyes were fixed on him. "Is the wine to your taste?" she asked.

"The timing of truth," said Lord Horn with heavy self-importance. "That's a matter for politicians like Ferris, and not mere ornaments like you and me."

The messages, god help him, were coming from Horn. Michael gritted his teeth against the archness of the man.

"The wine for the fish," the duchess continued with relentless, impersonal politeness, "I think is even better."

"Fish?!" Lady Halliday exclaimed. "My dear, I thought you said this was just going to be a picnic."

The duchess made a moue. "It was. But my cook got carried away with the notion of what would be necessary to sustain seven people on the river

in midwinter. I don't ever dare to argue with her, or I get creamed chicken for a week."

"Poor Diane," said Lord Ferris, smiling at her. "You let everyone bully you."

THE SKY OVER THE RIVER looked as though it were burning.

"Hurry!" Alec said. But as they rounded the corner to Waterbourne they saw that the light came from torches set in the nobles' barges in the middle of the river. Some ten or fifteen of them were clustered in the center of the dark water. They looked like elaborate brooches pinned to black silk shot with ripples of gold.

Alec whistled softly through chapped lips. "The rich," he said, "are looking particularly rich tonight."

"It's impressive," said Richard.

"I hope they aren't too terribly cold," Alec said, implying the opposite.

Richard didn't answer. He was absorbed in the sight of a new barge making its way upriver to join the others. Flames and black smoke spun back from the torches set in its prow, surrounding it with danger and glory. The green and gold pavilion was still closed. But it was the barge itself that intrigued him. He must have made some sound; Alec turned sharply to see what he was looking at.

"But of course," sneered Alec; "no party would be complete without one."

The prow of the barge reared up in the graceful curve of a swan's neck. Its head was crowned with a ducal coronet. In perfect proportion were the wings, fanning back to protect the sides of the boat. Despite the hangings, despite the flat bottom and outsized stern, the barge managed to give the illusion of a giant swan on the river. Its oars dipped and rose, dripping jewels with each stroke, so smoothly that the barge seemed to glide across the surface of the water.

"Who is it?" St Vier asked.

"Tremontaine, of course," Alec answered sharply. "There's the ducal crown all over everything. I should think even you would recognize that getup."

He had thought they were ornamental. "I don't know Tremontaine," he said; "I've never worked for him."

"Her," said Alec sourly. "Can't you detect the woman's touch?"

Richard shrugged. "I can't keep them all straight."

"I'm surprised you've never done a job for her. Diane is such a lady of fashion, and you are fashion's darling—"

"Diane?" Richard groped for and found the connection. "Oh, that one. She's the one who had her husband killed. I remember that. It was before I got fashionable."

"Killed her husband?" Alec drawled. "A nice lady with such a pretty boat? What a terrible thing to say, Richard."

"Maybe she didn't like him."

"It hardly matters. He was crazy anyway. She was made duchess in her own right, and they locked him up. Why kill him?"

"Maybe he ate too much."

"He died of a stroke."

St Vier smiled down at the ground. "Of course he did."

The barges were tilting and rocking as friends tried to get close enough to one another to exchange gossip and pieces of fruit. There were also several competing musical consorts. Their ears were assaulted by a dramatic volley of brass, uncomfortably tangled in the sinews of a harp and flute and the anemic arms of a string quartet.

"Well," said Alec, taking in the chaos down below, "at least we can be fairly sure he didn't die of boredom."

IN THE BARGES ALL AROUND THEM people were hurling food and greetings at each other with impartial good cheer. They received a couple of oranges, but in Diane's calm presence the party on the swan boat forbore to join the mêlée, while the swan's wings shielded them from missiles.

Mary Halliday, who, unknown to many, had a good ear for music, winced at the mélange of instruments and tunes. Smiling sympathetically at her, Diane said, "I wonder if we could get them to cooperate on 'Our City of Light'?"

"Not if you love me," said Ferris, the Dragon Chancellor. "I don't know much about music, but I know what I'm sick of hearing. We open every Council season with it."

"But," the duchess grinned at him, "have you ever heard it as a trio for trumpet, harp, and viola d'amore?"

"No; and with any luck I never will. What a pity you didn't bring your portative organ so we could drown them all out with 'God Hath Warmed My Heart.'"

"We would have to set the pipes at the rear, and the image would be unfortunate. If you're cold, my lord; just bite down on a peppercorn."

Suspicion was creeping into Michael's heart. Diane and Lord Ferris seemed terribly familiar. Could they have an intimate connection? Michael tried to tell himself not to be an ass. Lord Horn was boring him and Helena with a complicated story about some state banquet he'd attended, for which it seemed necessary to keep touching Michael's knee for emphasis. If he were a woman, Michael reflected, Horn would never dare to touch his knee. If it were true about Diane and Ferris, perhaps he could contrive to have Ferris killed. Or even—of course, he was still a beginner, but Applethorpe seemed to think he had some promise as a swordsman—he could call the chancellor out himself, without any warning so that Ferris couldn't hire someone else to come up against him. But fighting one's own duels was unknown. Might the duchess find it in poor taste? Or was it the sort of daring originality she looked for in him—

"As I'm sure Lord Michael would agree," Horn finished complacently.

Lord Michael looked up at the sound of his name. "What?" he said inelegantly.

Laughing, Lady Helena tapped his shoulder with her pomander, and Horn's clear grey eye fixed on him. It gave Michael a sudden distaste for the poached whiting he'd been eating.

"Helena," Michael demanded testily of the young lady with the pomander ball, "can't you learn to control your pet?"

The duchess's silvery laughter was all the reward he needed for what he considered a laudable, indeed a magnanimous, rein on his temper.

IT VEXED ALEC NOT TO BE ABLE TO provoke St Vier into betting on which barge was going to overturn first. He had the odds all figured out, considering the way those people were carrying on. "Look," he insisted patiently, over his own knowledge that St Vier never bet anyone on anything, "I'll make it very simple for you. If you think of—"

But a sennet of trumpets, well coordinated by the master of the fireworks, drowned Alec out. Amongst the barges servants hastened to put

out all their torches at once. The barges rocked wildly as they did so; the musicians, less well bred than their betters, swore. The backwash from the bobbing boats slapped at the shore. Laughter shivered up from the water. Then, abruptly, all was still as the first of the fireworks exploded against the sky.

It burst over them as a blue star, filling the sky with fiery petals for one awesome moment before beginning its lazy disintegration in point by point of blistering fire. On both sides of the river there was a hush as its sparks trickled down into the waiting blackness, leaving a ghostly trail of smoke that vanished even as they stared.

In the pause before the next one, Richard turned to his friend. But Alec's eyes hadn't moved from the empty sky. His face was a mask of blind desire.

Some local people had joined them on the rampart above the river—tradespeople, not scholars. They came in couples, courting, maybe, leaning close together with their arms around each other's waists. Alec never noticed them. Gold and green washed across his face as fiery garlands were hung across the sky.

Now a shrill whistle split the air; some people behind them jumped. Into the silent breach budded a knot of scarlet flame. Slowly it blossomed, and slowly dissolved into a host of tendrils, a flowering-tree of a flower, with a golden heart that emerged, pulsing, at its center. For long slow seconds all the landscape was drenched in scarlet. In those red moments Richard heard Alec give one passionate sigh, and saw him raise both his hands to bathe them in the glow.

The boom and snap of the fireworks, echoing from bank to bank, made it hard to catch footsteps. Richard was only aware of the newcomer when he felt the subtle disturbance of cloth at his side. His hand snaked down and caught the intruder's wrist, poised where most gentlemen kept their purses. Without looking down he pinched it savagely between the bones. Then he turned slowly to find out who was making the controlled gurgle of pain.

"Oh," said Nimble Willie, smiling up at him weakly but winningly, "I didn't know it was you."

Richard let go of his arm, and watched him massage the nerve. The little thief was as slight as a child, and his face, though peaky, was guileless. His

specialty was housebreaking. Richard was sorry to have hurt his crucial hand, but Willie was philosophical. "You fooled me, Master St Vier," he said, "in those naffy clothes. I thought you were a banker. Never mind, though; it's just as good I've found you. I've got some news you might want to have."

"All right," said Richard. "You may as well get a look at the fireworks while you're here."

Willie lifted his eyes, then shrugged. "What's the point? It's just colored lights."

Richard waited for the thrill of the next to be over before answering, "They're devilish expensive, Willie; they must be good for something."

IT WAS HOPELESS. The fireworks must be almost over, and Michael saw that he was to be nothing more on the swan boat than one of a party of friends. The duchess treated him no differently than any of the others; if possible, with more distance, since she knew him the least well. Moodily he slung back a draught of burgundy, and picked at his duck. At least she hadn't mocked him as she had Horn, when the fool went on and on about the fireworks he had seen in better days. Horn hadn't the wit to catch the two edges of her meaning. Michael had, but much good it was doing him. He had laughed at her sally, but she turned her eyes then to Lord Ferris.

Why Ferris? Was he better dressed than Michael? He was certainly more powerful; but the duchess wasn't interested in politics. Her money, wit, and beauty were all the power she needed, Michael thought. Ferris was dark where he was fair. Ferris wasn't even whole. He'd lost one eye as a boy, and what was otherwise a handsome face was unbalanced by a stark black eye patch. An affectation: he might at least have had a number of them made to match his clothing. Well, Ferris was not the only one with an attractive eccentricity. Michael himself was already deep enough in the adventures of the sword to cause a minor scandal. Just because he kept it hidden beneath a well-groomed exterior…He must find some way to tell her what he had done at her prompting; some way to get her alone, away from these others…

There was a sudden silence. The fireworks seemed to have ended. The others were exclaiming with disappointment, while servants cleared the

fifth course away, and lowered the sides of the pavilion again. The duchess gestured to a footman, who nodded and headed for the stern.

"If no one minds," she explained to her guests, "I think we should make our way out of this press before everyone else starts trying to. I know Lord Ferris has somewhere else to go tonight, but the rest of you may want to come into the house to warm up after."

"Oh?" Lord Horn leaned over to the chancellor. "Are you by any chance attending Lord Ormsley's little card party?"

"No." Ferris smiled. "Business, I'm afraid."

The duchess rose, gesturing to her guests not to. "Please, stay comfortable. I'm only going forward for a little air."

Michael's skin tingled. It was as though she had read his mind. He would give her a moment, and then follow.

THE FINAL VOLLEY OF FIREWORKS was a fugue of sound and light. Colors followed upon one another in ecstatic arcs, each higher and more brilliant, until the splendor was almost unbearable.

An awed but hopeful silence followed the last sparks down into the river. But the sky remained empty, a neatly folded blanket of stars on the bed of night. People shivered, then shrugged.

Alec finally turned to Richard. "Do you think," he asked avidly, "that an exploding firework could kill you?"

"It could," Richard answered. "You'd have to be sitting right on top of it, though."

"It would be quick," said Alec, "and splendid, in its way. Unless you kept it from going off." Nimble Willie shifted from foot to foot. "Oh. Hello, Willie. Come to pick—" Richard shook his head, indicating the tradesmen behind them. "—Come to see the fireworks?"

Once more the trumpets sounded, though less enthusiastically than they had at the start. Across the river the crowds were milling apart. The barge torches were being relit, and the string quartet had begun making a squeaky go at jollity. On the swan barge a woman emerged at the prow and stood facing into the wind that ruffled her cloak of fine white fur.

"There," Alec told Richard dryly. "You may admire the owner of your favorite boat. That's the duchess."

"She looks beautiful," Richard said in surprise.

"Anyone would," said Alec tartly, "in a great white boat in the middle of the river. You ought to see her up close."

It was hard to tell what he meant when he talked like that, as though he were making fun of himself for speaking, and you for listening. Richard had heard other nobles use that tone, though not, in general, to him. Nimble Willie, who had never enjoyed any nobleman's conversation, cleared his throat. "Master St Vier…"

He beckoned, like a small boy with a robin's nest to show. The two men followed him into a corner of the wall out of the wind and most people's sight.

The little thief brushed away the lock of hair that always seemed to be hanging over his nose. "Ah, now. I just wanted to say, there's been someone asking for St Vier these past two nights at Rosalie's."

"There," Alec said to Richard. "I knew we shouldn't have gone to Martha's"—although it was he himself who had insisted on it.

"And this man," Willie persisted, "has gold, they say."

"In Riverside?" Alec drawled. "He must be mad."

St Vier said, "Why wasn't I told about this before?"

"Ah." Willie nodded sagely. "He's paying, see. Putting out a bit of silver for word to get passed on to you. Two nights running, that's not bad."

"You want us to stay away another night?" the swordsman asked.

"Nah. My luck to find you, but there are probably others out looking, by now."

"Right. Thanks for your trouble." Richard gave the pickpocket some coins. Willie smiled, flexed his nimble fingers, and folded into the darkness.

"How the simple people do love you," said Alec, looking after him. "What happens when you don't have any money?"

"They trust me," said Richard, "to remember when I do."

A MOMENT OF SILENCE FELL when the duchess left the pavilion. All her guests were experienced socializers, but the departure of their hostess demanded a hiatus of reorganization.

In agony Michael listened to Chris and Lady Halliday talking about the weavers' revolt in Helmsleigh. Every second was precious; but he must not hurry out after her. At last he judged enough time to have passed. It being

impossible to slip away unnoticed, he yawned extravagantly and stretched his arms as far as he was able in his fitted jacket.

"Not tired already, my dear?" said Horn.

"Tired?" Michael smiled his sweetest smile. Now that he was about to get what he wanted, he could afford to be tolerant. "How could I be tired in such pleasant company?"

"Wine always makes me sleepy," Lady Halliday said in a somber attempt at graciousness. Lady Helena allowed that it did her, too, but she would never dare to admit it before gentlemen. Satisfied that attention was diverted from his movements, Michael began to rise.

Like a filigreed anvil, Lord Horn's hand descended on his shoulder. "Do you know," Horn leaned over to confide in him, "when I first knew Ormsley he barely knew ace from deuce? And now he's giving exclusive card parties in that great big monstrosity his mother left him."

Michael murmured sympathetically, and kept his muscles tensed to rise. "I gather," Horn said, "that you are not engaged tonight?"

"I'm afraid I am." Michael tried to smile, keeping one eye nervously on the doorway. He thought he could just see the white glow of the duchess's fur outside. At least Horn was no longer touching him; but he *was* looking slyly at Michael, as though they shared some understanding. It conveyed roguish charm with a confidence more appropriate to a younger man.

"You certainly are kept busy," sighed Horn, lowering his eyelids alluringly.

"As busy as I can manage," Michael said, with the arrogant glibness that is the opposite of flirtation. He saw Horn's face freeze, and added, "I do try to keep my dignity."

It was needlessly cruel—and hypocritical from a man met climbing out of a window. But Horn must learn sometime that ten years had passed since the days of his glory were even possible—and besides, the duchess had just appeared in the doorway, flushed and beautiful, like some river goddess, crowned with stars. Michael felt his heart knot in a little hard lump that slid down into his stomach.

"It's snowing," the duchess said. "So lovely, and so inconvenient. Fortunately there's plenty to eat if we're slowed by it."

She seated herself in a flurry of fur. The diamonds of snow that spangled her hair and shoulders glittered for a moment in the candlelight before

vanishing in the heat. “Now, I am sure you were all too polite to talk about me, so what gems of conversation have I missed?”

Lady Helena tried to match her banter, but fell short at brittle affectation: “Only the delight of Christopher telling us all what a hero he was at Helmsleigh.”

“Ah.” The duchess gave Lord Christopher a serious look. “The weavers are of some importance.”

“To my tailor, anyway,” said Horn jovially. “Local wool, he claims, will soon become inordinately priced. He’s trying to sell me all of last year’s colors at a bargain.”

Across the table, Lord Ferris raised the eyebrow not covered by his patch. “Hard to keep your dignity in last year’s colors.”

Michael bit his lip. He hadn’t meant his putdown of Horn to be public, much less to be taken up by others.

Horn inclined his head courteously. “I believe my tailor and I will reach an accord. He has known me for many years, and knows I am not to be trifled with.”

The lump in Michael’s stomach did a little somersault.

Ferris said to Diane, “I suppose we must call Lord Christopher one of Lord Halliday’s circle, if so great a chancellor may be said to have something so small as a circle. But on behalf of my own office I must commend his work at Helmsleigh.”

“You’re kind,” Lord Christopher murmured, assuming the stoic look of those forced to witness their own praise publicly.

“He isn’t, really,” the duchess told him. “My lord Ferris is horribly ambitious, and the first rule of the ambitious is never to ignore anyone who’s been of use.”

General laughter at the duchess’s wit broke the tension.

There were four more courses in almost an hour of slow rowing before they found themselves once again at the Tremontaine landing. When they arrived they were all a little cold, a little tipsy, and very full.

All Michael wanted was to be off the barge and away from this disastrous group. The duchess had first led him on, and now she was making him feel like a fool—and, worse yet, act like one. But Ferris had no right to take a private comment and use it against Horn, in a way designed to stir up ill feeling. Now Horn was sulking like a child over nothing at all. If Horn

himself had been more subtle, Michael would not have been forced to be so overt in his rejection. Horn spent the rest of the trip directing his attention everywhere but to Michael. Michael preferred it to his flirtation. The man was carrying on as though he'd never been turned down before, a situation which Michael considered most unlikely.

Despite his later appointment, Lord Ferris was induced to join the party inside the duchess's mansion for a hot drink. And despite his desire to get away, Michael felt it went against his dignity to leave before Ferris did. He knocked back his punch, and found the warmth of it dissolved some of the lump in his stomach. When Ferris called for his cloak, though, Michael did also. Diane said all the right things about how he really should stay; but there was no special light in her eyes, and he didn't believe her. She did escort both him and Lord Ferris to the door, and there she let Michael kiss her hand again. It was probably the punch that made him tremble as he took it. He looked up into her face, and found a smile so sweet fixed on him that he blinked to clear his eyes.

She said, "My dear young man, you must come again." That was all. But he lingered outside under the portico while the groom patiently held his horse for him, wanting to turn back and ask her whether she meant it, or to hear it again. A pair of missing gloves occurred to him, and he started back to the door. Through it her voice came clear to him, addressing Ferris: "Tony, whatever were you tormenting poor Horn about?"

Ferris chuckled. "You noticed that, did you?"

It was a voice of extreme intimacy. Michael knew the tone well. The door opened and he pressed back into the shadows, to see the duchess's white wrist pressed to Ferris's lips. Then she took a chain from around her neck and drew it across his mouth once before giving it to him.

Before his own reaction could betray him, Michael was out of the shadow of the house and up on horseback. And now he knew something about the duchess that no one else even suspected. And he wished, on the whole, that he were dead, or exceedingly drunk.

Bertram was able to oblige him in the latter. But even while dizzily wrestling in his friend's appreciative grasp, striving for oblivion, Michael was thinking of whether he could hurt her with it—just enough to give him what he wanted.

chapter VIII

IT HAD STARTED TO SNOW AGAIN by the time they got to Rosalie's. Soft flakes formed out of the darkness just before their eyes, falling like stars. Alec followed Richard down the steps and into the tavern, ducking under the low lintel. Rosalie's was in the cellar of an old town house. It was reliably cool in summer and warm in winter, always dark and smelling of earth.

The tavern's torchlight dazzled their eyes. Their clothes were steaming in the heat, their noses assaulted by the smells of beer and food and bodies, their ears by the shouts of gamblers and raconteurs.

As soon as Richard was spotted someone shouted, "That's it, everybody! No more free drinks!"

"Aww," they chorused. The serious dicers turned back to business, the serious drinkers reminded each other that life was like that. Certain of the Sisterhood came forward hoping to tease Alec, who would snap their heads off before he let them make him blush.

"Who told you about it this time, Master St Vier?" asked Half-Cocked Rodge, a local businessman. "I've got my money on Willie."

His partner, Lucie, leaned across the table. "Well, you can lay odds it wasn't Ginnie Vandall!"

The laughter this provoked meant something. Richard waited patiently to find out what it was. He had a guess.

Rodge made a place for him at his table. Lucie explained, "It's Hugo, my heart. Ginnie's bonny Hugo is after your job. Must have heard about the silver, and thought of gold. So Hugo walks in here last night, bold as you please, first time he's been here in months, he knows good and well this is your place for work. And he goes right up to this noble, tries to get his interest, but the man's no fool, he isn't having any."

"I'd like to meet this Hugo," said Alec doucely from where he stood behind Richard, leaning against a post.

Rosalie herself brought Richard some beer. "On me, old love," she told him; "you wouldn't believe the business you've brought me the last two nights by not being here!"

"Don't I get any?" Alec inquired.

Rosalie looked him up and down. The tavern mistress was conservative: to her he was still a newcomer. But Richard stood close to him these days, and she'd already seen a few fights fought in his defense; so she called for another mug for him. Then she settled down to argue with Lucie. "It's not a noble," Rosalie said. "I know nobles. They don't come to this place, they send someone else to do the arrangements for them."

"It is so one," Lucie insisted. "He talks like one. You think I don't know nobles? I've had a dozen; ride you up in their carriages on the Hill, put you to bed in velvet sheets and serve you hot breakfast before you go."

Richard, who really had had nobles, smiled; Alec sniggered.

"'Course it's a noble." Mallie Blackwell had joined the fray, leaning with both palms on the table so that her charms dangled in front of their faces. "He's in disguise. That's how you can tell 'em. When they come down to the Brown Dog to gamble, the nobles always wear their masks. I can tell you, I've had a few."

"It isn't a mask," Rosalie said. "It's an eye patch."

"Same thing."

"Oh, really?" asked Alec with elaborate nonchalance. "Which eye? Does it change from night to night?"

"It's his left," Rosalie attested.

"Oh," said Alec softly. "And is he a dark-haired gentleman with—"

"Hugo!" A joyful roar greeted the newcomer for the benefit of all. "Haven't seen *you* in a boa's age!"

Hugo Seville made a stunning picture standing in the doorway, and he knew it. Hair bright as new-minted gold curled across his manly brow. His chin was square, his teeth white and even, revealed in a smile of confident strength. When he saw who Rodge was sitting with, the smile faltered.

"Hello, Hugo," Richard called, cutting off his retreat. "Come and join us."

To his credit, Hugo came. Richard read the wariness in his body, and was satisfied that he would make no more trouble. Hugo's smile was back in place. "Richard! I see they've found you. Or haven't you heard yet?"

"Oh, I've got the whole story now. Sounds like it has possibilities. I haven't had a really challenging fight since Lynch last month."

"Oh? What about de Maris?"

Richard shrugged. "De Maris was a joke. He'd got fat, living on the Hill." Hugo nodded gravely, keeping his thoughts to himself. De Maris had beaten him once. "Oh, Hugo," St Vier said, "you won't know Alec."

Hugo looked over and slightly up at the tall man standing behind St Vier. He was watching Hugo as if he were an unusual bug that had fallen into his soup.

"I'd heard," Hugo said. "Ginnie told me there was a fight at Old Market."

"Oh, *that* Hugo!" Alec exclaimed, his face animated with innocent curiosity. "The one who pimps for Ginnie Vandall!"

Hugo's hand leapt to his sword. Rodge let out a chuckle, and Lucie a gasp. The buzz of conversation at nearby tables trickled to nothing as all eyes focused on them.

"Hugo's a swordsman," Richard told Alec, unruffled. "Ginnie manages his business for him. Sit down, Hugo, and have a drink."

Alec looked down at Richard, sitting calm and easy, one hand on his mug. Alec's lips parted to say something; then he only licked them and took a drink, his eyes fixed on Hugo over the rim of his mug.

They were green eyes, bright in the angular face, like a cat's. Hugo didn't like cats. He never had.

"I beg your pardon," the young man said, smooth as a nobleman. "I must have been thinking of some other people."

"I can't stay," Hugo said, sitting uncomfortably. "I have to meet someone soon."

"Well, that's all right," Richard said. "Tell me about this man. What did you think of him?"

Hugo could pay for his gaffe with information. It wasn't like him to try to steal Richard's jobs. Richard guessed that he had been unable to resist the money smell.

Hugo made much more money than Richard did. He was in great demand on the Hill for lovers' duels, and as a ceremonial wedding guard. He was dashing and gallant, well dressed, graceful, and fairly well mannered. He had not taken a challenge to the death in years. Hugo was a coward. Richard knew it, and a few others guessed it, but they kept their mouths shut because of Ginnie and the money he was making. Hugo's nerve had broken years ago, at a time when he was still fighting dangerous fights. He could have turned to alcohol to see him through a few more duels before it betrayed him; but Ginnie Vandall had seen the possibilities in Hugo and turned him from that path to a more lucrative one.

Richard appreciated Hugo. Now that St Vier's reputation was flourishing, the nobles were always after him to take dull jobs that challenged nothing except his patience. Richard turned them over to Hugo, and Hugo was glad. Hugo's income was steadier; but when a man was marked for killing, or a point needed to be made in blood, it was St Vier they wanted, and they paid him what he asked.

"Everyone here," Richard prompted, "seems to think he's a lord. Except Mistress Rosalie. What would you say?"

Hugo's flush was just discernible in the dim light. "Hard to tell. He had the manner. But then, he might have been putting it on." He glared in Alec's direction. "Some do, you know."

"Let's face it," said Rodge; "we wouldn't know him if it was Halliday himself. Who's ever seen any of 'em up close?"

"I have," said Alec coolly. Richard held his breath, wondering if his proud companion were going to declare himself.

"Lucky you! Where? Was he handsome?"

"At University," Alec said. "He came and spoke after there'd been a riot over the city's tearing down some student lodgings. He promised to found a scholarship and some new whorehouses. He was very well received: we carried him on our shoulders, and he kicked me in the ear." They laughed appreciatively at that, but Alec seemed unaffected by his new popularity.

He said sourly, "Of course you'll never see Halliday here. There are too many important people who want to kill him already; why should he come down here and let just anyone do it for free?" Alec slung his cloak around his shoulders. "Richard, I'm off. Let me know if the eye patch changes eyes."

"Don't you want to stay and see for yourself?"

"No. I do not."

Alec made his way across the tavern with his usual posture: head thrust forward, shoulders slumped, as though he were expecting to run into something. Richard looked curiously after him. After the fight at the Old Market Alec was probably safe enough on the streets, but his mood seemed strange, and Richard wondered what had made him leave so suddenly. He thought he'd go after him, just to ask; just to see what he'd say and listen to him talk in that creamy voice…the one-eyed messenger could come again tomorrow night if he really wanted him. Richard excused himself and hurried after Alec, who had stopped in front of the door as it opened inward. A tall man in a black felt hat came in. Alec looked up sharply at him, then brushed past, almost elbowing him aside in his haste to get up the stairs. Richard was about to follow when the man removed his hat, brushing snow off the crown. His left eye was covered with a black patch. He had turned his whole head to look over his shoulder after Alec. Then he slammed the door shut behind him, and turned and saw Richard.

"Dear me," he said wearily, "I hope you're not another unemployed swordsman."

"Well, I am, actually," said Richard.

"I'm afraid my needs are quite specific."

"Yes, I know," he answered. "You wanted St Vier."

"That is correct."

Richard indicated an empty table. "Would you like to sit by the fire?"

The man's mouth froze in the act of opening; then it stretched into a smile, a speaking smile that conveyed understanding. "No," he said courteously, "thank you. If you won't be too cold there, I would prefer a corner where we will not be disturbed."

They found one, between a support-beam and the wall. Richard folded himself neatly into his seat, and the stranger followed, taking care with the placement of his clothes and the end of his sword. It was an old-fashioned, heavy sword with an ornate basket handle. Carrying it exposed him to the

danger of a challenge, but not carrying it left him looking more vulnerable than he would wish.

The man's face was long and narrow, with a dark, definite jawline, heavily shadowed. Above it his skin was pale, even for winter. The cord of his eye patch disappeared into hair as dark as a crow's plumage.

Unbidden, Rosalie brought two mugs to the table. The one-eyed gentleman waved them away. "Let us have wine. Have you no sack? Canary?"

The tavern mistress nodded mutely and snatched the beer mugs back. Richard could have told him that Rosalie's wine was sour, her sherry watered; but no one had asked him.

"So you're St Vier," the man said.

"Yes." The stranger's face went opaque as he scrutinized the swordsman. None of them could ever resist doing it. Richard waited politely as the man took in his youth, his uneven good looks, the calm of his hands on the table before him. He was beginning to think this was going to be one of the ones who said, "You're hardly what I expected," and tried to proposition him. But the stranger only nodded curtly. He looked down at his own gloved hands, and back at Richard.

"I can offer you sixty," he said softly.

It was a very nice sum. Richard shrugged. "I'd have to know more about it first."

"One challenge—to the death. Here in the city. I don't think you can quarrel with that."

"I only quarrel on commission," Richard said lightly.

The man's lips thinned out to a smile. "You're an agreeable man. And an efficient one. I saw you fight off two men at Lord Horn's party."

"You were there?" Richard hoped it might be a preface to his identity; but the man only answered, "I had the fortune to witness the fight. It's a mystery to everyone still, what the whole thing was about." His one eye glinted sharply; Richard took the hint, and returned it: "I'm afraid I can't tell you that. Part of my work is to guard my employers' secrets."

"And yet you let them employ you without any contract."

Richard leaned back, entirely at ease. He had a fair idea of where this was going now. "Oh, yes, I insist on that. I don't like having my business down on paper in someone's drawer."

"But you open yourself up to a great deal of danger that way. Should any of your duels be investigated, there is no written proof that you are anything but a casual murderer."

St Vier smiled, and shrugged. "That's why I'm careful who I work for. I give my patrons my word to do the job and to keep quiet about it; they have to be trusted to know what they're doing, and back me up if need be. In the long run, most people find they prefer it that way."

Rosalie returned with two dusty pewter goblets and a flagon of acidic wine. The man waited until she had gone before saying, "I'm glad to hear you say so. I've heard your word is good. That arrangement is suitable."

When he drew off one of his gloves, the expensive scent of ambergris drifted up. His large hand was as creamy and well tended as a woman's. And when he lifted the flagon to pour out the wine, Richard saw the marks of rings still pale on his bare fingers. "I am prepared to pay you thirty in advance."

Richard raised his eyebrows. No point in pretending that half in advance wasn't unusually generous. "You're kind," he said.

"Then you accept?"

"Not without more information."

"Ah." The man leaned back, and drained half his cup. Richard admired the self-control that let him lower it from his lips without an expression of disgust. "Tell me," he asked, "who was that tall man I passed, coming in?"

"I've no idea," Richard lied.

"Why do you refuse my offer?"

Richard said in the comradely tone that had so bemused Lord Montague over his daughter's wedding, "I don't know who you are, and I don't know who the mark is. You can offer me all sixty in advance, I still can't give you my word on it."

The gentleman's eye glared at him with the intensity of two. But he kept the rest of his face blandly civil, contriving even to look a bit bored. "I understand your need for caution," he said. "I think I can set some of your fears to rest." Slowly, almost provocatively, he removed his other glove.

Again the scent of ambergris assailed the air, rich and sensual. It made Richard think of Alec's hair. The man held up his hand. Dangling from it was a long gold chain, with an eight-sided medallion spinning at the end of it so that Richard could not make out its design. The candle between them

winked a gold sequin in his eyes. With one finger the man stopped the spinning, and Richard had one sight of the device engraved on the medallion before it disappeared again into the glove.

"Sixty royals," the man said, "half in advance."

Richard took his time as he brought the goblet to his lips, took a sip of the dust-flecked wine, put the cup down, and wiped his mouth. "I don't take money on an unnamed man.—It is a man?" he added abruptly, somewhat spoiling the effect, but wanting to keep things clear. "I don't do women."

The man's lips quirked; he had heard the Montague story. "Oh, yes, it is a man. It is a man of some importance, and I am not going to tell you any more without further indication of interest on your part. Are you at liberty tomorrow night?"

"I may be."

"It would be advantageous. Do you know the Three Keys, on Lower Henley Street?" He did. "Be there at eight. Take a table near the door, and wait." The gentleman reached into his coat and withdrew a little silk purse that clinked when he set it on the table. "This should cover expenses." Richard didn't pick it up. It made a sound like silver.

The gentleman rose, spilling a little shower of copper on the table for the tally, and pulled on his scented glove. "It took a long time to find you," he said. "Are you always so hard to get?"

"You can always leave a message for me here. Just don't make it worth people's while not to deliver it."

"I see." The man smiled wryly. "Your friends are not to be bribed?"

The idea amused St Vier. "Everyone can be bribed," he said. "You just have to know their price. And remember that they're all afraid of steel."

"I will remember." The man sketched him the slightest of bows. "Good night, then."

RICHARD DID NOT BOTHER TO FINISH THE WINE. He considered taking it home for Alec, but it was bad enough to leave. Rosalie did keep a stock of decent vintage, but you had to know how to ask for it. Ignoring the curious looks of his friends, he left the tavern and went home.

The eaves of the house were fanged with icicles. Marie's rooms were quiet; she must still be out. He looked up at his own rooms. The shutters

were open, the windows dark. He let himself in by the courtyard stairs, mounting quietly to keep from disturbing Alec.

Despite his care, the floorboards creaked. It was an old house, built of heavy materials with a great care for solidness. At night they heard it settling on its foundations, like an old woman on her doorstep shifting into a comfortable position in the sun.

From the other room Alec called blearily, "Richard?" The bedroom door was open; Alec usually left it that way when he went to bed alone. Richard could see him in the dark, a white figure propped against the heavily carved headboard. "Are you going out again?"

"No." Richard undressed quietly in the dark, laying out his clothes to air on the chest. Alec held the covers back for him—"Hurry up, it's cold." Between the linen sheets Alec's warmth had spread; Richard sank into it like a hot bath.

Alec lay on his back, his hands folded demurely behind his head. "Well," he said, "that didn't take long. Don't tell me it was another wedding."

"No, it's not. It's a real job, looks like it could be interesting. Move your elbow, you've got both pillows."

"I know." Richard could hear the satisfied smile in the dark. "Don't go to sleep. Tell me about it."

"There's not much to tell." Abandoning the pillow, he moved his head into the crook of Alec's arm. "They're playing hard-to-get. I have to show some more interest."

"Who's *they?*"

"You'll laugh."

"Of course I'll laugh. I always do." It was the voice, rich and arrogant and taut with breeding, that always undid him in the dark. He felt for Alec's lips with his fingers, and softly brushed over them.

"It's funny. I think he's a lord, all right, but he seems to be working for another house."

"Working *with* them, more likely." Alec's lips moved against his fingers, the tip of his tongue touching them as he spoke. "I bet you're right, it must be something big. The fate of the state is in your hands—" Alec seized the fingers that were touching him, and Richard's other hand as well, drawing them from what they were doing in a convulsive grip, feeling there for the

old ragged scar on Richard's wrist. Richard guided his mouth to it. "So how do you know," Alec murmured into his skin, "that it's two houses?"

Gently Richard freed one hand, and began stroking the length of Alec's back. It pleased him to feel the taut body relax under his touch, straining languorously to be closer to his. "He showed me a medallion with a device," he said.

"Which you didn't recognize and were too embarrassed to ask about… ah, that feels nice."

"As a matter of fact, I did recognize it. It was that swan woman's, the duchess."

For all the tricks Alec played with his voice, he had never realized how easy it was for the swordsman to read his body. It stiffened suddenly, although Alec's voice rambled on, "How delightful. Isn't it nice to know, Richard, that you're not the only one to have succumbed to the allure of the swan boat?"

"I haven't succumbed," Richard said comfortably. Alec must have recognized the nobleman. "Although I wouldn't mind a ride on that boat. But they have to name their mark first. If it's a good job, I'll succumb to the money."

"You think so?"

"I think so."

Alec breathed out in a feathery sigh as Richard sought out his pleasure, always careful not to startle him with anything sudden or unexpected. Sometimes finding it was like stalking prey, or coaxing a wild creature to his hand. Alec stopped speaking, let his eyelids fall thin over his bright eyes, and Richard felt his body coursing fluid like water, as though he held the power of a river in his arms.

When they kissed, Alec's arms tightened around his shoulders; then they began to move up and down Richard's body as if looking for something, trying to draw something out of the taut muscles of his back and thighs.

"Ah!" Alec said, contentment mingled with surprise; "you're so beautiful!"

Richard stroked him in answer; felt him shudder, felt the sharp fingers sink into his muscle. Richard teased himself, pulling Alec along with him deeper into no-return with the smoothness of skin against skin, the

harshness of breath and bone. Alec was talking now, his voice rapid and full of air—not making any real sense, but a pleasure to have that light voice in his ear, gasped syllables stirring his hair, lips teasing his earlobe, breaking off occasionally to sink sharp teeth there.

"There is no one like you, they never told me there was anyone like you, I had no idea, it amazes me, Richard—Richard—if I had known—if I—"

Alec's hands struck against his throat, and for a moment Richard didn't realize that pain was pain. Then he pulled away, catching the fragile wrists before they could try again whatever mad notion Alec had of attacking him.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded, harsher than he'd meant to because his breathing was not yet under control.

Alec's body was rigid, and his eyes were wide, glinting with their own unhealthy light. Richard ran one hand along his face to soothe his terror; but Alec wrenched his head away, gasping, "No, don't!"

"Alec, am I hurting you? Has something happened? What is it?"

"Don't do that, Richard." The long body was trembling with tension and desire. "Don't ask me questions. It would be easy now, wouldn't it? You could ask me anything. And I'd tell you like this, I'd tell you…now that you have me like this I'd tell you anything—anything—"

"No," Richard said, gently gathering him into his arms. "No, you won't. You're not going to tell me anything. Because I'm not going to ask." Alec shuddered; some of his hair worked loose across his face. "There's nothing I want to know, Alec, I'm not going to ask you anything…" He started to brush back the hair, soft and brown as an old forest stream; then he changed the gesture and lifted it to his lips. "It's all right, Alec…lovely Alec…"

"But I'm not," Alec said into his shoulder.

"I wish you wouldn't argue all the time." Richard's fingers luxuriated in the high-bred bones. "You are very lovely."

"You are very…foolish. But then, so is Ferris."

"Who's Ferris?"

"Your friend in the tavern. The Mysterious Mr. One-Eye. Also the one and only Dragon Chancellor on the Council of Lords." Alec carefully licked his eyelids, one at a time. "He must be crazy to come down here. Or desperate."

"Maybe he's just having fun."

"Maybe." Alec's long body twisted around him, adding weight to his statements. "Somebody has to."

"Aren't you?"

"Having fun? Is that the idea? I thought we were supposed to be providing material for poets and gossips."

"I kicked them out."

"You skewered them."

"I skewered them. Roast Poet on a Spit."

"Gossip Flambée…Richard…I think I can see what you mean about having fun."

Richard intercepted the hand poised to tickle him, and turned the motion into quite another one.

"I'm glad. You are lovely."

chapter IX

THERE WAS, AFTER ALL, NO REAL REASON for Richard not to go to the Three Keys the next night. If Ferris took it to mean that Richard accepted the job, that was his mistake. When he knew the name of the mark he would decide whether to take the job or not. He only hoped he would find out now, and not be offered more circumlocutions and little bags of silver.

Richard crossed the Bridge well armed. The poor who lived around the wharves tended to be desperate and unskilled, without pride or reputations

to lose. They would jump a friend as readily as they would a stranger, and give no challenge first. The upper city people thought they were a spillover from Riverside. Riversiders sneered at them as graceless incompetents who knew enough not to cross the Bridge.

The Three Keys was admirably suited to mysterious rendezvous. It was set in the middle of nowhere, between warehouses and counting-houses that were vacant at night, silent except for the occasional step of the Watch. People with nowhere else to go went there, seeking anonymity. Some sought oblivion: as Richard approached the tavern he saw the door open, a rectangle of dusky light, and a body come pitching out. The man lay snoring stertorously on the melted snow. St Vier stepped around him and went in.

He had no trouble finding a table near the door. It was a chilly night, with damp fog off the river, and the room's population was clustered at the other end, near the fire. They were mostly men, companionless, nameless. They noticed the newcomer; a few looked at him twice, trying to figure out where they'd seen him before, before going back to what they had been doing.

His contact aroused more interest. It was a woman who appeared poised in the doorway, cloaked and deeply hooded, her shadowed face turned toward the table. Richard wondered if it might not be the duchess herself this time, imitating Ferris's feat of bravado slumming. Whoever it was, she recognized him at once, crossing to his table with a firm stride. Before she could reach him, however, a large red-faced man sauntered up and barred her way, saying in a less than ingratiating growl, "Hello, sweetheart."

Richard started to go to her, then saw her flash of steel. "Clear off." She was holding a long knife to the drunken man's chest.

"Hey, sweetie," the man coaxed, "don't get upset." And he wasn't as drunk as he looked, or else he'd once been a fighter, because suddenly the knife was on the floor. He had her wrist in his hand, and was pulling her in to him when she twisted away, shouting, "Richard!"

St Vier came forward, his knife already out. The man saw and his grip slackened enough for the woman to pull away. "Get out of here," Richard told him, "or find yourself a sword."

A man in a leather apron came hurrying up from the back. "Outside," he said; "you know the rules."

The drunk rubbed his own arms, as though he had been hurt. "Lenny," he said to the tapster, "you know I don't mean anything. What the hell have I got to fight for?"

Richard gestured with his dagger: Back. The man backed off, and faded with Lenny into the rear of the tavern.

With Richard covering her, the woman picked up her own knife and replaced it in her sleeve. She sighed, and shook herself all over. "I can't believe I did that," she said.

"I can." Richard returned to the table. "You've got that hood in your eyes, how do you expect to see anything?"

She laughed and shook the hood away from her face. A mass of fox-colored hair tumbled down with it. "Buy me a drink?" she grinned.

"Just one?" he answered her smile. "Not eight? Or have you lowered your limit these days?"

"I'm not testing it here: this place serves river water, mixed with raw spirits to cut the taste."

"It seems"—he looked back at her assailant—"to do the trick, whatever. Sit here, so I can keep an eye on him."

"Yes." She snuggled down, with her elbows on the table. "They told me you'd look after me. I think you're *awfully* brave. Do you really *kill* people with that thing?"

"Oh, well, only for money." He looked at her blandly. "Is that modest enough for you?"

"It's an improvement. You're the best in the city now."

"I was then, too."

She laughed, exposing brown teeth in a strong pretty face. "That's right. But word's trickled up to the ones who make the judgments. You know the channels as well as I do."

Richard snorted. "Channels! You kill enough people for them, they finally realize you know how to."

Impatiently she said, "Don't start up with that. You're important now, and you know it." She looked stern, her grey eyes opaque and businesslike. "How long do you think that you can keep on playing him out?"

"I don't mean to. I just need more information. Tell me about the other…lady."

"What other lady—" Her face began to flush and she dropped her eyes. "I don't think that that has anything to do with this," she said gruffly.

"I'm sorry." Richard reverted to his polite, dealing-with-clients voice. "I thought you were with another household." He had learned a great deal from her discomfort—more than he'd really intended to.

"I'm his chambermaid." She gave him a hard, defiant look across the table. "One of them. We keep the place clean. It's a nice house."

"You look well," he said. Neither of them brought up the name of her master, she by instruction and Richard because he obviously was not supposed to know it. "Life on the Hill agrees with you."

She looked directly at him, cutting through the sociableness. "It agrees with me better than jail. I thought it would be nothing, being whipped; it happened to everyone else, and they just laughed and went back to stealing." She lowered her gaze to her hands, folded on the table. They were well shaped, the rounded fingers in pleasing proportion to the palm. Richard saw that their skin had coarsened from menial work. "But that straw they give you *smells*, and they strip the dress off your back as though it meant nothing, as though you're some actor putting on a good show for the crowd. I saw what it was like, and how it all came out—What happened to Annie?"

It took him a moment to remember who she meant. "She got better. Then she lived like a queen for a while, before they caught her again."

"And then?"

"She died that time."

She nodded. "I'd rather die in private. Or take a nice clean sword thrust, like you did to Jessa—"

"No," Richard said. "You wouldn't."

But she'd left Riverside long ago, and she wasn't afraid any more. The past was a story told, a battle fought. "I really thought you loved her, that one," she said quietly.

"I don't know," Richard said. "It doesn't matter. Why did you get sent down here?"

She shrugged. "He—I work for him. He had to send someone."

"He knew you'd know me."

She looked down at the table, deeply polished and carved from the flow of other people's hands. "He just knows I'm from Riverside. You know the

way they lump us all together up there."

She had a right to her privacy. That her noble employer was also her lover seemed sure; how else would Ferris know that her past included St Vier? Nor would the lord be likely to entrust a common servant with such a delicate mission. For Katherine, it was a good thing: Ferris was not unattractive, and his favor could help her stay out of Riverside.

"And you," she asked. "Are you alone now?"

"No." She let out a tiny sigh. He said suddenly, "Katherine. Is he hurting you?"

She looked tired. She shook her head. "No. I don't need anything. Just an answer to bring back."

"You know I can't answer yet," Richard said; "you know the way I work."

"You haven't heard all the question." She was smiling strangely, looking at him out of the corners of her eyes. It was another woman's smile; he didn't know whose, but he knew what it meant.

Richard reached across the table, and covered her hand with his. "It's an idea," he said; "but not yours or mine. Tell him you asked; tell him you plied me with drink, but I was more interested in money. It's actually true," he added lightly. "People get the strangest ideas about swordsmen."

Calmly she repossessed her hand, saying dryly, "I can't imagine where they got them." Then, following his tone with its offer of safe trivialities, "They miss you on the Hill, now you're not young and wild anymore. Who've you finally settled down with, Ginnie Vandall? No one seems to know."

"It's a man," he told her, "a stranger called Alec."

"What's he like?"

He seemed to consider the question carefully. "Nothing else, really. He's not like anything I've ever seen."

"What does he do?"

"He used to be a student, I'm pretty sure of that. Now he tries to get himself killed," he told her with perfect seriousness.

"With what, falling rocks?"

"Falling rocks, knives, people…anything that's handy."

She considered the prospect. "A student. Can't fight."

"Total incompetent. It keeps me busy."

"Protecting him."

She let the words hang in the air. She could hurt him now with a name—or try to. *Jessamyn*. A beautiful woman, an accomplished thief, rising con-artist…she and the young swordsman together had dazzled Riverside like twin stars. Jessamyn was not incompetent, she knew how to use a knife. Jessamyn had a temper, and one night she had made Richard lose his. There had been no protecting her.

Katherine could try to hurt him with it—but what if nothing happened? Richard had always been likeably sure of himself. But these last few years had cast a glamour over him. There were no more rough edges, no hesitations. He turned a smooth face to the world, making it see him as he saw himself. It pleased her to think that here was someone who didn't care what others thought of him, someone free from the daily struggle for dominance. But it chilled her to think that he believed it himself, that his life was free of all that made human life impossibly painful. She found she did not want to try.

"Really," Richard said, "if you want another drink, you can have it."

"I know," she said. "What's he trying to kill himself for?"

"I don't know. I haven't asked."

"But you don't want him to do it."

St Vier shrugged. "It seems stupid."

Slowly, not to alarm him, she took out her knife to look at it and shook her head. "When I came in here…I shouldn't have called for you. I should have stuck that idiot when I had the chance."

"This isn't Riverside. You could have got into trouble."

She kept shaking her bent head, hair dancing along her cheeks like snakes. "No. I just couldn't do it. I missed my chance because I couldn't do it."

"You were cumbered by the hood." She looked up, smiling: "cumbered" was a country word. But he met her eyes gravely: "Anyway, it doesn't matter. You'll never have to go back to Riverside."

She hoped it was true. "Don't tell him I fumbled," she said.

"I won't. I probably won't even see him again."

"I don't know." She pulled a flat, folded piece of paper out of her cloak. It was closed with blank gobs of sealing wax. "It's what you think it is. Open it when you get home. He says he doesn't want to rush you: you've got a week to think about it. If you decide to go ahead with it, be at the Old Bell

a week from tonight, same time. Someone will be there with the first half of your payment."

"Half in advance…he really meant it. Generous. How will I know the messenger?"

"*He'll* know *you*. By the ring you're wearing."

"What ring?"

This time she handed him a small doeskin pouch. Richard loosened the drawstrings, and glimpsed the heavy glow of an enormous ruby. Hastily he closed it, and tucked the pouch inside his shirt, along with the sealed paper.

"And if I don't go…?"

She smiled at him, a ghost of her old street smile. "Wear it anyway. He didn't say anything about giving it back."

The ring was worth almost as much as the job itself: double payment, the gift that was a bribe. Lord Ferris was no idiot, nor was he heavy-handed.

Katherine stood up, wrapping herself in the cloak. She stood only shoulder-high to St Vier. He dropped one of Ferris's silver pieces on the table for the tally. When she queried with her eyebrows he explained, "It's the smallest he gave me. Maybe he thinks I only drink rare wines."

"Maybe he thought you'd get change for it," she replied. "Get the change, Richard, or there'll be talk."

He got the change, in brass, and pocketed it. Then he stood very close to her and handed over the silver pouch. "'For expenses' was what he told me. I wouldn't want to be guilty of a cheap evening." Mutely she took what he offered. She could buy a lot with that money; and if he didn't need it, so much the better for him.

As they walked out, the rows of men muttered flatly, "Good night, sweetheart. Take care of yourself, darling."

They left the tavern. Over their heads the three iron keys, with a few flecks of gold still clinging to them, jangled in the wind. They turned up Lower Henley Street, making for the Stooping Eagle Tavern, where one of Ferris's footmen, discreetly attired in buff, waited to escort her back to the Hill.

IT WAS LATE WHEN RICHARD CAME IN, but Alec was still up, reading by the light of a candle. Alec looked up out of the circle of light at him, blinking at

the darkness across the room.

"Hello, Richard."

"Hello," Richard said amiably. "I'm back."

Slowly St Vier unbuckled his sword. He removed his knives gingerly, as though they were infants, or creatures who might bite, and placed them on the mantel.

"I see you're back," Alec said. "You've missed all the excitement. Marie got into a fight with one of her clients. She chased him three times around the courtyard, throwing socks and using language. He tried to hide behind the well. I threw an onion down at him. I missed, of course, but it scared him. Maybe he thought it was you. Anyway, he finally went away, and then the cats started yowling up on the roof and I didn't have anything left to throw at *them*. Have you?"

"No. I don't think so. I think they've gone away," said Richard, who hadn't heard anything.

"I think we should get a cat of our own. We could train it to fight. It could chase them away. After all, there's no point in sending *you* up on the roof."

"Why not?" Richard asked, going over to the window. He looked up. "I could get up there. Easy." He hoisted himself onto the sill.

"It would be much easier," Alec said, "to get a cat. We could save its life—pull a thorn out of its paw or something—and it would be forever grateful."

Richard swung open the window and leaned out, holding on with one hand. "You are making me giddy," said Alec, "and anyway, all the cats are gone. You said so yourself."

"I'm not going to fall. But it isn't far. You could jump, and probably not break anything, if you had to. Right down to the courtyard."

"Marie would have a fit. You look like an idiot standing in that window. You look like you're expecting to fly away."

Richard laughed, and jumped back down into the room. He landed badly and staggered upright. "There!" he exclaimed. "That's what comes of listening to you."

"I didn't tell you to jump out of the window."

"You're always telling me to get drunk. Well, now I've done it, and I don't like it." He sat down hard on their only chair, assuming the pose of

one who didn't intend to get up for a long time.

"Drunk on what?" Alec asked; "the usual blood?"

"No, brandywine. Really horrible brandy. I knew I didn't like getting drunk, and now I can remember why. I keep having to remember where my feet are. I really don't like it at all. I don't see how you can stand it so often."

"Well, I never care where my feet are. Don't tell me you let Ferris feed you horrible brandy!"

"No, I did it myself. All by myself. I thought I might like it. You're always saying I'd like it. Well, I don't like it. You were wrong."

"You've said that," Alec said, "twice. If you think I'm going to apologize because you can't keep track of your own feet, you're mistaken. Let's go out. I'll teach you to dice."

"I'm drunk, not insane. I'm going to bed."

Alec stretched on his chaise longue like a cat, one thumb still in his book. "Richard, *why* did you get drunk? Wasn't Ferris there?"

"Of course he wasn't there. Someone else was there."

"Were they horrible to you? Are you going to kill them?"

"No, and no. God, you're bloodthirsty. I'm not going to kill anybody. I'm going to sleep. Get me anything you want for breakfast, just not fish."

Somehow he must have got himself undressed and into bed, because suddenly there was a hand gripping his shoulder and Alec's voice saying over and over, "Richard, Richard, wake up." He noted crossly how slow his reaction was as he groaned and turned over, saying in a thick voice unlike his own, "What is it?"

He hadn't closed the shutters; a dim bar of silvery moonlight fell across the bed, illuminating Alec's hand tense on the coverlet, crushing Lord Ferris's paper.

"You were snoring," Alec drawled ingenuously; but the whiteness of his knuckles on the paper betrayed him.

"Well, I've stopped." Richard didn't bother to argue. "What do you think of Ferris's message?"

"I think his spelling stinks." With the weight of the seals for ballast, Alec flipped the paper open.

There was no writing on it; only a drawing of a phoenix rising from the flames over a series of heraldic bends.

"It's a coat of arms," Alec said grimly. "Do you know whose?"

"Of course. I've seen it all over the city. On his banners, and carriages, and things."

"It's Basil Halliday," Alec said portentously, as though he hadn't answered.

"It's Basil Halliday," Richard agreed. "You're stealing all the blankets, and you haven't even got into bed yet."

Somewhat frantically, Alec tucked the covers around him, and began to pace the room. "This *is* the man Ferris wants you to kill?"

"Ferris or that duchess does. I haven't quite figured them out yet. He must be protecting her."

"He can't be running errands for her. A man of his rank would no more do that than polish his own boots. Could the drawing mean that Halliday's another patron?"

"No. This is the usual way the smart ones announce a mark. I should burn that paper. Remind me in the morning."

"Don't go to sleep," Alec ordered.

"I don't think I…" His jaw cracked in a yawn. But he forced his eyes to stay open. "What's the matter?" he asked. "I've told you everything I know. Can you tell me any more? Is there something I should know?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Alec's face closed like a trap door. "Know?" he repeated, honey and steel. "I know enough to stay out of their way when they're playing these games. You think you're above it all, Richard—but they'll chew you up, and then you won't much care whether they swallow you or spit you out."

Richard wanted to explain that that didn't happen to swordsmen: they took their pay for whatever the job was and went home, leaving the nobles to argue the results out amongst themselves. For the first time he seriously wondered whether Alec knew the Hill at all, not to know that. But all he said was, "I'll be fine—if I take the job at all. I've got time to say no. But the duchess will pay for it, and Ferris will keep me out of trouble. You'll see. Maybe they'll send us up to Tremontaine until it blows over—live in a nice cottage by a stream, go fishing, keep bees…how'd you like to go to the country for a while?"

"I detest the country," Alec said icily. "Go back to sleep."

St Vier closed his eyes, and finally it was dark enough. "All right. But only because I'm feeling so agreeable. It's too bad. I'm going to feel awful in the morning."

"Sleep in. You always feel splendid in the afternoon."

And that is just what he did.

chapter X

IT WAS TOO SOON, Lord Ferris was thinking as he mounted the street to the Halliday town house; too soon for Basil Halliday to know what the game was.

Katherine's errand was freshly executed. In a week, if all went well, Ferris would have the swordsman's answer, and plans for the Crescent Chancellor's mortal challenge could begin to go forward. Even if Katherine had contrived a look at the closely sealed paper she carried, Ferris was certain of her movements for the last day; and he thought she was not false to him. St Vier was no agent of Halliday's either; of that Ferris had made sure.

There was no telling what today's invitation from Lord Halliday to come and "talk privately" meant. It was an informal note in Halliday's own hand; perhaps his secretary did not even know of it. It put Ferris on his guard, but the Dragon Chancellor of the Inner Council could not ignore a summons from its Crescent, however mysterious—and perhaps it was only a tricky piece of Council business that Halliday wanted to discuss with him before anyone else heard about it. The informal note might be just that: Halliday's

secretaries had been heard to complain that their master's informalities drove them to distraction. Ferris might have to wait behind whoever else had the official appointment at this hour.

The Halliday town house stood alone at the top of a steep street; inconvenient, but possessed of a magnificent view. It was a house without a gate: all its gardens were at the back, overlooking the river. Ferris saw a couple of well-built men lingering about the edges of the property. It was not too soon, it seemed, for the Crescent Chancellor to have begun to worry about the danger the election put him in. He was going to be well guarded from now on. It eased Ferris's mind a little: the defense was sufficiently vague to imply that Halliday knew of no specific plan. He was well guarded. St Vier was going to have to be clever. But then, St Vier's reputation said he was. He had just better not be too clever to take the job.

Perhaps, Ferris thought, he should have timed things more tightly, given the swordsman less time to think the offer over. But Ferris had acted on an impression of St Vier at the Riverside Tavern: the swordsman had the self-respect of an artist, the vanity of a lover. Like a lover, he must be wooed; like an artist he must be flattered. Giving him time to think things over was an act of trust and respect that Ferris hoped would clinch the deal. It also wouldn't hurt for St Vier to have made up his mind long before the next set rendezvous, so that he came to it eager, straining at the bit.

Ferris found Basil Halliday in his study, surrounded by papers and half-empty cups of chocolate. Halliday's hair was mussed; he must have been running his fingers through it. There was an ink stain on his forehead to prove it. His smile on seeing Ferris was all the more charming for its preoccupation. Ferris relaxed a shade, and began to wonder what he was expected to be charmed into this time.

"What," Lord Halliday said to Ferris without preamble, "do you think friend Karleigh is up to now?"

"The duke?" Ferris answered. "Sulking out on his estates, I should imagine. Where he should be, after you had St Vier beat his swordsman at Horn's."

"I? I didn't hire him. I know that's what they're saying, but that duel was the first I knew of any challenge."

"It's what Horn's saying." That answered that question. Ferris did not like the implications. Who else but Halliday had the power to frighten

Karleigh through a purely formal duel into retreating into the country at this time of year? Someone strong and secret, who wanted no impediment to the Crescent Chancellor's re-election…or else Halliday was capable of a dirtier game than he pretended. "I should know not to listen to Horn's opinions."

"You're young," Halliday said cheerily; "it will pass." And it was too bad if it hadn't been Halliday's swordsman: Ferris liked the ironic symmetry of Halliday's chasing Karleigh away, since it would make it easier to fix suspicion on Karleigh if he were out of town.

"So Karleigh is trying to unseat you in absentia, is he?" Ferris helped himself to some lukewarm chocolate.

"My lord duke has gone and put up the money for Blackwell's theater to revive *The Kings End* next month—assuming it's stopped snowing by then."

"Oh, it will. It always does. They'll open right on time. You know, Basil, *The King's End* is a really awful play."

"Yes." Halliday grimaced. "I remember it well. It's got a lot of stirring speeches against monarchic tyranny in it: 'Rule by one man is not rule but rape,' that sort of thing. Mary and I will have to sit somewhere obvious and applaud loudly."

Ferris stroked the chair arm. "You could close them down, you know. Blackwell's theater is a thieves' den and a public health hazard."

The older man's eyebrows lifted. "Oh, Tony. And I thought you *liked* the theater. You sound like Karleigh—that's just the tyrannic gesture he's trying to goad me into making. But he gauges everyone else's temper by his own. I won't close the theater—especially because I hear they'll also be reviving one of the old blood-and-revenge tragedies, which I adore. They manage to be rigidly moral, without rubbing your nose in it—unlike *The King's End*, which grinds its point home three times in the first speech. I wonder which actor looks enough like me to play the deposed king?"

"None, I expect; they're all undernourished." Ferris adjusted his eye patch. He must remember not to be so surprised when Halliday showed himself able to see through the machinations of others. And he must resist pushing too hard right now: if it were possible to destroy the Crescent Chancellor through giving him bad advice, Ferris would have contrived to do so long before this, and the forthcoming scene with St Vier would be unnecessary. "I must say you're taking it all pretty calmly. If the city riffraff

get turned against you by Karleigh's secondhand agitation, it won't help your re-election in Council any."

"Oh, Mary gets all the temper," her husband smiled; "you get the carefully thought-out plan."

"You have a plan." Ferris walked to the other end of the room, letting amusement mask his relief. Far from uncovering the plot against him, Halliday was about to take him further into his counsels. Well, why not? He had never given the Crescent cause to doubt him. Oh, he disagreed with him in Council from time to time, as a respected opponent. But their true policies lay so far apart that there was no point in even trying to diminish Halliday by orthodox means.

Halliday's policies were built on an uneasy fusion of city and country. He seemed to believe that the nobles no longer provided the link between the two that their control of the land had given them for so many years; that as the city grew more prosperous independent of them, they would lose their influence there, and meanwhile were also losing the land through inattention. Admittedly, the Crescent Chancellor's rapprochements with the Citizens' Council, and his popularity with the general populace, were doing some good; but to Ferris it was a hazy plan for an even hazier future. If Halliday didn't love the city so much, he would have gone back to the country long ago and made a model of his own estates. He was not an inefficient administrator; and Ferris had to admire the way he achieved his ends by disguising them in concepts the Council could accept; but it was all too clear that he was, in the end, a dreamer—and that sooner or later his prized innovations would catch up with him and lose him the support of the nobility. Karleigh, the arch-conservative, had already sniffed out the tone, if not the content, of Halliday's program. The Crescent was dangerously overreaching himself by pressing the election this spring; but then, circumstances left him small choice. And if he won, the support would cement his position, possibly for life. If he lost, his successors might make such an administrative muddle that he could still return in glory.

As for his plan…Ferris decided to assume the best. "You honor me with your confidence, my lord."

Halliday smiled. "I have my reasons. *Despite* the fact that you do not make up one of my faction of vocal supporters."

"But neither do I stand up for Karleigh. My reasons for that are evident to everyone with eyes to see it. My lord duke is nothing but a pompous meddler with a touching faith in his own rhetoric."

"Oh, no," Halliday said in smooth surprise. "You mistake him. The Duke of Karleigh is a hero, the last man of integrity with due regard for Council law. Many people have said so, not least himself. We have here a wealthy, and thus powerful, man who now proposes to exercise that power. He gave some marvelous dinners before he found it necessary to leave for the country—at least, I hear they were excellent; I was not invited, though you may have been. Hospitality may obscure pomposity. And his rhetoric has already divided a formerly unified Council. We had an interest, a mutual purpose we had not known in years. Now he is planning to disband it, so that his fantasies of the golden days of Lordly Rule may be given full scope to take us all on the long run off a short dock!"

"You haven't considered," said Ferris gently, "that, technically, he is in the right? The Crescent was a courtesy title; it was never meant to be what you've made of it."

Halliday turned a bleak eye on him. "Wasn't it? Then why do things work better when someone takes central authority, bearing the brunt of complaints by election, rather than by fashionable whimsy? When someone can formally represent us to the Citizens' Council? I have no more power than people and necessity give me. Even Karleigh cannot say I have broken a single procedural rule. Hear me out, Ferris—and then question me. It's not a question I want to see buried and disposed of. But behold Karleigh's vision: where is his candidate to replace me?" Halliday put his chocolate cup down with a little more force than he'd intended. "He hasn't got one. He doesn't care what happens to the Council once he's pulled me down."

"He wants the Crescent for himself, of course," Ferris said. "Several of his forebears held it, back when it meant giving good parties and making sure no one spoke out of turn in meetings. All the dukes are a little crazy about their hereditary rights."

"Which is why, I suppose, he is working so hard to deny me my elective ones! Holding the Crescent will not suddenly bestow greatness on that idiot," Basil Halliday said with rancor. "I should think even *he* would know that by now. His ideas are popular, but *he* isn't. He's quarreled with half the Council over their lands, and with the other half over their wives."

"But not with me," Ferris said quietly.

"Not with you. Not yet." Halliday leaned back in his chair. "Tell me, Tony; what would happen if I set up a puppet to hold the Crescent in my place until I became eligible for the position again?"

"Almost anything. Your man might become too impressed with his own power, and refuse to listen to you. He might try to follow your suggestions and simply be too weak to hold the Council together as you do." And, Ferris was thinking, he would have to be a weakling in the first place even to consider the position.

"Exactly," said Halliday. "A weak man couldn't do it, and a strong man wouldn't want to." Ferris smiled a sour smile at Halliday's insight. "But if the measure to prolong my term is voted down," the Crescent continued, "I shall have to support someone after me. I've given it a lot of thought. I expect you have, too."

Under Halliday's clear gaze, Ferris felt horribly exposed. He thought of the guards outside, and himself in Halliday's house, alone and vulnerable to mortal challenge. But that was not the drift of Halliday's message. Unlike Ferris and the Duchess Tremontaine, Basil Halliday was not given to hiding double meanings behind his words.

Ferris said, "It's all very well for this once. But when I became eligible for re-election, you might not find me so easy to defeat."

"But," Halliday grinned, "it would put me on the same side as Karleigh in this one, if I'm voted down. He'll hate that."

"What a motive!"

"Then you're willing?"

"For the Crescent? I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. To take what you've made of it, to guide a strong Council under the cloak of your support…" He told Halliday what he wanted to hear. It wasn't hard to do. But even this surprising act of visionary generosity made him want to laugh. Halliday's eyes were so fixed on the future, he couldn't see what was right in front of him!

"But how is any of this going to solve your problems with Karleigh? I should think you'd want to put your energies into seeing that there's no *need* to support my election!"

Basil Halliday looked surprised. "It's simple. Go and talk to Karleigh."

For once, Ferris was utterly at a loss. “My lord,” he said. “That would be fatal. Karleigh can’t keep his mouth shut, and I would lose all your supporters in a stroke.”

Halliday suppressed an impatient gesture. “Ferris…I’ve watched your careful stratagems to remain neutral in Council. It drives people crazy—they come to me complaining that they can’t tell which side you’re on. Do you think I don’t know how hard it is to build that base? I want to use it, not tear it down. Speak to Karleigh on your own behalf. Say what you need to say. You’re not my man; I can’t send you to plead my cause, especially not now that I’ve offered you such a plum if I lose. Just go and confuse him a little—make the issues less clear cut—I know you can do that, Tony.” His smiling face hardened. “But mark this: if you play me false, I’ll know it. And I’ll see that there’s no cloak for you to step into.”

Ferris said, “You don’t like dueling, do you?” Halliday shook his head. “You don’t approve of the use of swordsmen in general; perhaps because you’ve had to preside over the outcomes of too many Duels of Honor. It can make one jaded. But there is a duel on between you and Karleigh. You think adding me will make it a new form of sport?”

“Something like that.” The Crescent Chancellor gave an unwilling smile. “Karleigh is so old-fashioned.”

“And I am, at heart, a sportsman. But a cautious one. When did you want me to see Karleigh?”

“As soon as you can conveniently make the trip.”

“Ah,” said Ferris; “that won’t be for another week. I have some affairs in hand here that need tying up. But then…then, we shall see. It may well be convenient then.”

chapter XI

BOTH MICHAEL GODWIN AND LORD HORN were to remember the duchess's barge party, but for different reasons. Michael had already put the Horn incident out of his mind as one more unpleasantness in a evening rife with them. To be perfectly correct, he should have sent Horn a formal apology; but he was young, and arrogant, and very much preoccupied with banishing Diane from his mind. It required him, in the days that followed, to plunge into a feverish round of purportedly pleasurable activities: running and riding races, exchanging large sums on their outcomes; going to parties with people one's mother wouldn't know about, and being fitted for clothes to wear to them. It was clear that the duchess didn't want him. She was merely an accomplished flirt. If she was carrying on with Ferris, that was her affair; on reflection Michael realized that to call her reputation to question publicly would only damage his own. There were plenty of other distinguished beauties to be had with far less trouble. He continued to see Bertram Rossillion, and took to flirting with Helena Nevilleson until her brother told him to stop. He had begun the flirtation to annoy the treacherous Olivia, Bertram's wife; by the time Chris caught up with him it had done its work: Lady Olivia was as formal and distant as if she had never stumbled against Michael's coat to whisper to him the time to come to her room. Michael was glad of her distance; when he remembered how he had first encountered Lord Horn, he blamed her for that, too.

It was surprising, with all his other activities, that Michael found time to continue with his sword-fighting lessons. But in fact he found that only in Applethorpe's studio was he entirely free of Diane's image. He was ripe to fall on the day when the Master pushed him.

Standing in front of a group of sweating men, all paired off and glaring at each other after a workout of stroke and counterstroke, Applethorpe had said mildly, "You all want to be the best. Forget about it. The best already exist, and you'll never touch them. Just be good enough to do what you have to do."

The young men had shaken their muscles out and laughed, some at the Master's tendency to lecture, others in shamefaced recognition of their own ambition. Lord Michael stared at him, still panting from the exercise. He felt the blood pounding in his head. Of course he was good enough to do what he had to do. He always had been. For the first time he realized that perhaps not everyone was; that some never would be.

After the lesson, his mouth dry, he went up to the Master and asked, "What did you mean by that, *the best*?"

Applethorpe held out his arm, and one of his assistants removed his glove for him. He said to Michael, "The true swordsmen, of course. Men who must earn their living fighting to the death—and who must win every time. There aren't very many of them, of course; most last only a season or two before they die, or retreat into a cozy guard post on the Hill, or take to easier jobs."

"Where do they come from?"

The Master shrugged both shoulders. "You mean, where did they study? Who knows? I had a teacher; crazy old man, drunk half the time, brilliant when he could see straight. If you need to learn, you do it." He waved his hand as though swatting away gnats. "It's not the sort of thing you come *here* to do. It takes more than two hours a week." The point struck home.

Soon Michael's friends were making up stories to account for his disappearances: he had a low-bred lover on the other side of town; he had discovered a genius tailor living in some garret…someone who saw him near the stables said it was a horse he was training for the spring races. But nothing could be substantiated. Michael was careful. He went to Applethorpe's every day to drill, and took a private lesson weekly.

LORD HORN'S REACTION TO THE EVENTS of the fireworks night was to send a letter to Richard St Vier in Riverside. Alec brought it home from Rosalie's on the day after Richard's meeting with Katherine at the Three Keys. Richard had just got up. He didn't have a headache and he didn't feel

sick, but he was moving cautiously in case something should begin. He was terribly thirsty, and was drinking well-water.

Alec waved a large parchment at him. "Letter. For you. It's been at Rosalie's since yesterday. You get more letters than a first-year debutante."

"Let me look at it." Richard examined the large crest that sealed the paper. "Oh, no!" He laughed, recognizing it from the gates of the winter ball. "It's from Lord Horn."

"I know," Alec said demurely. When Richard shook the paper it fell open, and he saw that Alec had already slit the wax away from the paper in one clean piece. "Not bad," he approved; "but didn't they teach you how to seal it up again?"

"I generally don't bother," he answered blithely.

"Well, what does it say?" Richard asked. "Is he trying to hire me, or does he want to take me to court for messing up his shrubberies?"

"I haven't read it yet. I just wanted to know who it was from. The handwriting is really bad—I bet it's his own. No secretary writes like that."

"Clever Horn," Richard observed sarcastically. "Doesn't want his secretary to know he's trying to hire me, but lets everybody in Riverside see his crest. What does it say?" he asked again; but Alec was laughing too hard to tell him.

"Take a deep breath," Richard advised. "I can't understand a word you're saying."

"It's the spelling!" Alec chortled helplessly. "Pompous idiot! He thinks—he wants—"

"I am going to put snow down your back," Richard said. "It's a sure cure for hysterics."

Alec read aloud, "'As you may be no doubt aware, my servant Master de Maris encountered grave misfortune in his profession last month—' He means you killed him. G*rave misfortune*—I wonder if Horn knows about puns?"

"What is he after, an apology? If he wants a new house swordsman, tell him my rates are twenty—no, make it thirty a day. An hour."

"No, wait, it's not that. '—Happily, this may be turned to your advantage, for I am prepared to offer you employment of the sort which I believe you usually engage in, and will no doubt find acceptable.'"

"No doubt." Richard flipped a knife at the ceiling. "You're right. He's an idiot. Tell him no."

"Oh, come on, Richard," Alec said cheerfully. "Just because he's an idiot doesn't mean his money's no good."

"You'd be surprised," St Vier said, retrieving the knife in one high jump. "I don't like working for stupid people. They can't be trusted. And he doesn't know much, or he'd never have hired de Maris."

"They don't care who they hire. It's only fashion."

"I know," he answered imperturbably. "Who does he want me to kill?"

"*Challenge.* Please. We are gentlemen here, even those who cannot spell. Or read." Alec held the paper at arm's length, squinting at the writing, "'There is a matter of honor which has touched my honor—' No, that's crossed out—'which has touched my spirit, wounding it with a mighty g-gash that may only be…'"

"Steady, Alec."

"'…only be healed by the sword! The matter of the injury need not concern you. I am prepared to pay you as much as forty royals as a hiring fee. In return for which sum you will act as my surrogate by means lawful and honorable in the challenge to the death of Lord Michael Godwin of Amberleigh.'"

"Who's that?"

"Who cares? You can off him and be home in time for supper with forty lawful and honorable royals under your belt."

"Can he fight?"

"'All they know how to do with their swords is poke lapdogs.' I believe I quote you directly. I don't suppose this Godwin rises above the other doggie-prodders."

"Then Hugo can kill him."

"Ah." Alec tapped the letter against his palm. "Shall I tell Lord Horn that?"

"Don't tell Lord Horn anything," Richard said bluntly. He picked up an iron shot and flexed his wrist against it. "I don't do business by letter. If he had any brains he would have found that out first."

"Richard…" Alec was swinging his heel over the arm of the chaise longue with an irresponsible air. "How much do you suppose it would be worth to Lord Michael to find out that Horn is trying to kill him?"

Richard tried to see his face, but it was hidden by shadow. He asked, "Why? Have you been losing at dice again?"

"No."

The swordsman stood poised on the balls of his feet, the shot balanced between his two hands. "You do understand," he said carefully, "that my reputation rests on people knowing I will keep their secrets."

"Oh, I understand," Alec said blithely. "But it was stupid of Horn to put it in writing, wasn't it?"

"Very. It's why I'm more interested in working with Ferris and his duchess"—he swung the weight in the air—"than with Horn. Burn that letter now, will you?"

WHEN MICHAEL WASN'T DREAMING OF the duchess's chilly eyes, he was thinking of ways to disengage a man coming at him in perfect form. They knew him at the school, now. A couple of the other serious students, servants training to be guards, wanted him to come drinking with them after, and he was running out of excuses. It wasn't that he disdained their company; in fact, he liked them for being serious about the same thing that he was; but while he was confident of being taken for a commoner through the rigor of lessons, he wasn't sure he could keep it up socially. He was learning to speak more quickly in their company—and had, in fact, recently alarmed his manservant by rapping out the demand that his boots be cleaned "any which way." Michael amused himself around the city by singling out shops he could pretend he worked in; by handling precious stones and imagining he spent his days selecting them for clients instead of for himself…but it never could feel real to him.

Michael was not entirely surprised when the Master drew him aside after his lesson to speak with him. He had been asking for an additional weekly lesson, but so far Applethorpe had only nodded absently and said that he would see. Now Michael offered to take him out and buy him some dinner so they could discuss it in comfort.

"No," said the Master, looking off at a tall window at the end of the studio. "I think we can talk in here."

He led the way into a small room originally designed for the old stable's tack. Now it was cluttered with gloves, throwing-knives, pieces of canvas,

and other detritus of the academy. They sat down on a couple of targets that gently oozed stuffing.

Applethorpe rubbed his chin with his fist. Then he looked at Michael. "You want to be a swordsman," he said.

"Umm," said Michael—a habit he was supposed to have had trained out of him at an early age. There was no question what the Master was talking about: men who earn their living fighting to the death—and who must win every time.

"You could do it," said Vincent Applethorpe.

A series of inadequate responses flashed through Michael's head: *Oh, really?…What makes you say that?…May I ask if you're serious?*…He realized he was blinking like a fish. "Oh," he said. "You think?"

Swordsmen were not expected to be masters of drawing-room conversation. Applethorpe answered as though he were making perfect sense, "I think you're suited. And I know you're interested. You should begin at once."

"I should…" Michael repeated numbly.

The Master began speaking with the terse excitement he used in the thick of a good lesson: "Of course it's a bit late for you—How old are you, nineteen? Twenty?" He was older than that, but the easy life of a city noble had spared his youth. "You have the feel, though, the movement, that's what's important now," Applethorpe rushed on without waiting for him to answer. "If you're willing to work, you'll have the skills as well, and then you'll be a match for any of them!"

Michael managed, finally, to come up with a complete sentence. "Does it work that way? I thought it took years."

"Of course it does. But some of it you've already got. You had the stance on your first lesson, many of them take months just on that. Still, you'll have to work, every day, for hours on end if you want to be able to take on the others and stand a chance to live. But if you'll take it seriously, if you'll let me teach you, I can give that to you."

Michael stared at him. The Master's one hand was clenched on his knee. Michael was arrested by the sight of the swordsman's body, perfectly poised, tensed for an answer. He thought sadly, Now I have to tell him. I've come to the end of this particular game; I have to tell him who I am. I can't possibly be a swordsman.

Applethorpe studied his face. The tension left the Master, his enthusiasm snuffed out like a candlewick. "Of course, this may not be important to you."

It came to Michael then that he was a fool to think that Applethorpe hadn't known all along who he was.

"Master Applethorpe," he said, "I'm honored. Stunned, but honored."

"Good," said the Master with his customary mildness. "Then let us begin."

chapter XII

ST VIER'S ANSWER, when Lord Horn received it, was soon reduced to a crumpled rag on the floor. In an eccentric handwriting distinguished by strong vertical strokes, it read:

> *Thank you for your kind offers. We have enjoyed reading them even more than you intended. Unfortunately, the job in question does not really suit our current needs. We wish you luck with it elsewhere.*
> *(Your future letters will be returned unopened.)*

It was signed, "The St Vier Dueling Corporation, serving Riverside and Gentry of Distinction."

It was enough to make him stop thinking about Michael Godwin for a while. Wrapped in mute fury, Lord Horn went off to salve his pride with the

prestigious company of the Lords Halliday, Montague, and other notable gentlemen at a dinner party given by the Dragon Chancellor.

TOMORROW NIGHT, FERRIS WOULD HAVE HIS ANSWER. He had given St Vier enough time to think the job through; enough time to become eager. Once the swordsman took the advance payment he was committed to the venture, and would wait until he was instructed to strike. Once St Vier was committed, Ferris was going to let him wait, as close as he could come to the Council election. It gave Ferris time to fan the Karleigh/Halliday feud. It gave St Vier time to learn Halliday's routines. There must be no obstacle to the formal challenge being met and Halliday being heroically dispatched: Ferris planned to inherit a martyr's crown. By then some of Halliday's supporters might have learned of his favoring Ferris, so Ferris could take the Crescent before suspicion lit on him. Once he had it, suspicion would light where he willed it to.

Anticipation heightened Ferris's senses, sharpening his appetite for all activities the way that when he was a child the most mundane events of the days before New Year's and its presents had been inexplicably thrilling: the ice breaking on the surface of the washbasin was like a promised revelation; the untying of a shirt savored of unwrapping packages; and every night's blowing out the candle brought the glad day one flame closer. Lord Ferris found some of the same savor in being Dragon Chancellor: something was always about to happen, and every action was invested with meaning. As he sat now at the head of his table, surrounded by wealthy and powerful men and the remains of the dinner they had shared, he cracked a nut between his strong white fingers and smiled to feel the thrill it undeniably gave him.

One by one they departed, for bed, for other engagements, until all that remained were the Lords Halliday and Horn. Ferris knew that Halliday was hoping to talk to him after the last of his guests had gone; what Horn wanted only Horn knew. Perhaps he simply had nowhere else to go, and didn't want to return to his empty house.

The ornate dining room seemed to swallow the three men; even rank cannot stand up to architecture. Lord Ferris suggested that they adjourn to a sitting room to drink hot punch. Ferris was a bachelor, at thirty-two considered one of the prize catches of the city. The sitting room of his town

house remained as his mother had decorated it when she first came to the city as a bride, in the bulky, comfortable furniture and deep colors of the previous generation. Although he himself preferred it, Lord Horn had banished the best of his old pieces to his country house, where style mattered less.

A young woman came in to tend to the fire. Ferris smiled when he saw her, inclining his head so that he could encompass all her movements with his one eye. She was broad-hipped, big-breasted, and handled the iron tools deftly; but something about her suggested malnourishment—maybe only her small height, or the tight way she clutched her plain skirts back from the fire. As she curtsied to her master at the door Ferris said, in his lovely speaker's voice that swayed the Council of Lords, "Katherine, stay. We are all a little drunk; we need someone sober to look after the fire."

Her eyes darted nervously to the other two lords and back to him. "I'll get my mending," she said finally.

But Lord Ferris raised one elegant hand. "Indeed you will not," he drawled affably. "You will sit there—there, under the mirror, where the light catches your hair, and I will send for John to bring you a glass of sherry. Unless you'd prefer something else?"

"Sherry will be nice," she said, settling into the chair he had indicated, across the room from the gentlemen; "thank you."

Her voice was flat, the vowels clipped and curt. Lower city. But she moved with assurance, a certain flair to the wrist and the set of the head. It didn't occur to either of the visitors to identify Riverside haughtiness; but then, neither of them had ever been there. They were surprised to see Ferris behaving this way—he must be drunker than he appeared. Bringing a mistress into a bachelor gathering was not unheard of; but it was unlike Ferris, and inappropriate for the company. If she was only a servant, it was unkind to impose their society on her.

Ferris smiled disarmingly at his guests, inviting them to excuse his whimsy. "A touch of feminine beauty," he explained, "is essential to the after-dinner drawing room."

"If we speak of feminine beauty," Lord Horn put in expertly, "it is a shame that Lady Halliday is not with us."

But Lord Halliday resisted being drawn into the conversation. He had had reports of the Helmsleigh weavers that disturbed him; nothing that

wouldn't keep until morning, but he would sleep easier knowing that Ferris was worrying about it too. So he kept quiet, in the hope that Horn would be content with center stage long enough to talk himself out and leave. The woman in the chair was now ignored: a momentary whim of Ferris's that he seemed to have forgotten about.

Ferris was enjoying himself immensely. Everyone in the room was now confused except for him. He always took pleasure in Horn's company, for what he knew were ignoble reasons: Horn's dullness, his relentless second-rate innuendo, reinforced Ferris's estimation of his own social cleverness and political subtlety. He could run conversational rings around Horn, make him jump through hoops, bat him across the floor like a cat with its food. It was a private pleasure: the trick was not to let Horn know he was doing it.

Katherine folded her hands in her lap. She knew that Ferris was not so drunk as he was pretending to be. It was nice to sit down and rest, but she was quietly bored, watching the nobles showing off for each other. Lord Horn and her master were avidly discussing swordsmen, although they didn't seem to know much about the subject.

"Bah," Horn was saying. "They have no power. They do what you pay them to, and that's all."

"But," said the younger man, "should they choose not to accept your commission…?"

"Mine?" Horn said sharply; but Ferris's one-eyed countenance was as benign as it could be. He was looking at the girl, smiling.

"Oh, anyone's," Ferris answered. "A figure of speech."

"Starve 'em out," Horn said. "If one won't take your money, another will."

"You don't think it's dangerous, then, to have someone knowing your plans not being in your employ?"

"Dangerous?" Horn repeated, his face flushing with the thought. "Not unless he goes over to the other side. Which isn't likely, knowing the way they work. If he betrays you, he'll never get another job."

Ferris twisted a gold ring on his hand. "That is certainly true."

"It's not so much dangerous—" Horn warmed to the subject, assured now that Ferris knew nothing of his recent disappointment with St Vier, and happy to be able to complain about it all on a theoretical level—"not

so much dangerous as it is disgraceful. After all, no one's asking them to think. *They* don't have to rule in the city, they don't have the care of the land in their hands. They've no need to concern themselves with the judgments of their betters. They just take the money, and do the job. Look—my tailor doesn't refuse to make me a riding jacket because he doesn't like horses! It's like that. You let them start thinking they have the right of refusal—"

"But they do have the right." Basil Halliday shifted in his soft chair, unable to keep still any longer. "That at least you must grant them, Asper. They're risking their lives for us, poor fools; it's up to us to make it worth their while, so that they won't refuse the work."

Ferris looked sympathetically at Lord Horn. "Yes, but rejection is never pleasant," he said softly. "No matter who it's from. Asper is right, really: it all comes down to a question of power. Do we have the power, or do they?"

"They have the swords." Lord Halliday smiled down at his hands; "We have everything else. It comes out fairly even, though, with the tip of one pointed at your throat."

"Every man lives at swordspoint," Ferris intoned.

Horn laughed by reflex, scenting an epigram.

"I mean," Lord Ferris elaborated, "the things he cares for. Get them in your grasp, and you have the man—or woman—in your power. Threaten what they love, and they are absolutely at your mercy: you have a very sharp blade pressed to their throat."

"And so," Lord Halliday picked it up, "you can disarm someone empty-handed. Take honor, for example: if you held mine in your power, I would have to think twice about refusing you anything."

"But honor," Horn broke in, "is a property of nobles, not of common swordsmen—at least, as we understand it. For them, it's a commodity they market along with their swords, and hang on the chimney with them when they go home to their trulls and their drink and their petty quarrels. They live like dogs in Riverside, caring for nothing: they change their women as we change our coats, and waste our money as fast as we can give it to them."

"But you're wrong," Ferris said softly. "There is no man living who cares for nothing." His head was turned to face Horn, but his good eye was on the girl. "All you have to do is to find it."

She downed the last of her sherry in one swift gulp.

"He may not want to admit it—who does?—but even in Riverside human vices bespeak human passions."

"No one's denying that." Basil Halliday spoke calmly. From the tension of the girl across the room, he saw that the exercise in philosophy had ceased to be a game—maybe had never been one. He recognized the impulse in Ferris to play with the power he had been given; it was something one went through at a certain stage. Ferris's end seemed to be domestic. It was not for Halliday to judge another's personal relationships: everyone in the city was strange, if you looked deeply enough. But he saw no need to be a silent accessory.

So Halliday continued, "But Horn is right. Ours is a different kind of honor, because we hold a different power. No lord acts as one man only: he has the power of the state behind him, the power of his birth and wealth. I should say it was beneath our honor to use them in a personal quarrel."

Ferris turned his head to look at him. "That is why swordsmen are so useful, my lord: they represent private enterprise. Indeed, as Horn was saying before, a swordsman's honor extends only so far as he may be trusted."

"And no further?" Halliday asked. "What about what it means to the man himself?"

Ferris smiled his thin-lipped smile. "There's some disagreement on that point. But why not ask Katherine? She's our local expert on swordsmen's honor."

The small woman got up, making for the hearth. But Ferris stopped her. "Sit down, Katherine. The fire is going fine by itself. Tell us about the home life of swordsmen."

She sat stiffly, her spread fingers clenched on her knees. Her eyes on the floor, she said, "It's like what the other gentleman said. Drinking and dicing and fighting."

Ferris sat back, enjoying himself. "I hear they do us a service, pruning out the undesirables of Riverside."

"There's a lot of killing that goes on," she said. "That's why you don't want to go there."

"But their women are safe, surely? There must be something they cherish."

A grim smile spread across her face, as though she'd just got the point of a joke. "I knew a man once who killed his…mistress."

"Out of jealousy?"

"No, in a fight."

"A swordsman with a temper."

"Hers was worse, much worse. Nobody blamed him, really; or if they did, there wasn't much they could do about it. We all knew her."

Even Halliday sat transfixed, Riversiders were seldom found as house servants; under her humility a wildness burned, the fear of a trapped animal.

"What about the man," Ferris asked. "Is he dead too?"

"Hardly. He killed two swordsmen in a garden last month."

Horn's breath caught. "Despicable!" he muttered. "First he killed my house swordsman, now he's murdering defenseless women."

"Not the sort of man," Ferris said, "who seems to care for anything. Probably wise of him, considering the position it would put him in otherwise."

"He was well enough cared for himself a few years back, before he got so fussy about commissions," Horn said with sudden rancor. "Of course, I couldn't say whether he took money for it…you know how they are when they're fresh from the country: young, and easily impressed."

"Asper," Basil Halliday said quietly. "The woman's a friend of his."

But Katherine was smiling at Lord Horn. "Yes," she said, "those were wonderful times. He used to bring flowers back from the Hill with him. Kind of a shame he ever took up with…that woman as he did. But he's turned his back on Riverside *and* the Hill now: got himself a student with no money, and he kills for him for free."

Ferris too turned to smile at Horn. "I suppose vices learned in youth stay with you. He was not in your set, I take it?"

Horn allowed his lip to curl slightly. "I have never approved of chasing after swordsmen. There's no…dignity in it."

"You're right," said Ferris.

Katherine got up hastily, bunching her skirts in her fists, and bobbed a curtsy to Lord Ferris. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, thank you." Ferris smiled the melancholy smile his lean face was suited for. "You look tired. Forgive me for keeping you. Yes, that's enough.

Good night."

Lord Halliday felt strangely tired himself. The evening had not been pleasant: something was going on between Ferris and Horn, something petty concerning swordsmen—and sex, probably, knowing Horn's proclivities. He had a distaste of staying further in the other men's company. Confessing to himself that Horn had outlasted him, he rose to go. Horn, naturally, followed him. As they waited for their coats, they heard a commotion at the door. The messenger was looking for him, for Lord Halliday, had been to his house already and could brook no delay—

Halliday's guts twisted at the thought of danger in his house; it was almost with relief that he saw the state seal on the paper, and knew that whatever had happened had not happened to his family.

He scanned the letter and looked down at the waiting faces. "It's the Helmsleigh weavers, I'm afraid. They've taken their grievances south into Ferlie, and amassed quite a crowd. They're holding council there, Tony, hard by your estates." Ferris swore. "And they're burning looms and houses."

"Well," said Ferris, his face grim. "Then all those negotiations were for nothing. I'll go at once. Give me a cordon of City Guard, and I can raise my own men on the way to Ferlie. Just give me an hour to settle my affairs—"

"You can't travel tonight. The local bailiffs have already called up some help. If you sleep and start in the morning you'll get there more safely, and far better rested."

There was more clatter in the yard: the arrival of an eyewitness, one of Ferris's own men from Ferlie. He had come with an escort. The men must rest the night; the weavers knew the Lord Chancellor had been sent for, and were still for now.

Lord Ferris's guests left without further ceremony. After seeing to the arrangements of his messengers, the first thing Ferris did was to pen a note to St Vier. The matter could not go forward without his close supervision; he wanted no moves made while he was out of town. For the time being, Halliday was spared.

It was late when he finally sent for Katherine. Clad only in a shirt and dressing gown, he was lying on his bed, not in it, catching a few hours' rest before the dawn. He held the sealed note out to her: "I want you to see that your friend gets this before tomorrow night."

As her eyes widened in protest he said, "Of course you needn't go to Riverside yourself. I've told you I wouldn't send you back there. You have contacts. Use them. I can't send one of my own people, someone might recognize them." She took the letter, still staring at him. "Kathy, you look frightened." He drew her to the bed, and pulled a quilt over them both, undoing her clothes as he continued to speak: "I promise you there won't be much more of this. You'll see him one more time, when I get back, and that will be all." She gripped his shoulders, forcing him to hold her. "I won't let him hurt you, as he did your friend."

"It's not that," she said; "you never thought it was that."

"Well, I'm sorry if I embarrassed you in front of company. There was a point I needed to make."

"Well, you made it. But he won't care what you do to me."

"Ah," he smiled dreamily, "you can't believe that. But even if you do, it doesn't help him any. You see, it works both ways. I can tell how you'd feel if St Vier came on any mischance." He stilled her protests with his thin lips. "Now don't worry. He isn't going to refuse me, and I'm not going to hurt him. But it's nice to know that I can trust you both."

Pressed under him now, she began kissing his chest, his neck, his jaw, as though her fever of nerves could be mistaken for passion and silence his flow of words.

Ferris, breathing hard above her but refusing to be taken in, continued, "Have you seen his scholar lover, by the way?"

"No."

"I have; although it wouldn't have done to say so. I heard all about him in that Riverside place you sent me to. And then he nearly knocked me down coming in the door."

She stopped still, and had to start again. "Oh? What's he like?"

But his hands were on her shoulders now, it didn't matter what she did. "Thin. Ragged. He's very tall."

He leaned his full weight into her.

He slept for a while; when he woke up she was still there, limply curled around a pillow. He said to her, "Incidentally," interrupting her dreams, "incidentally: Asper—that is, Lord Horn—will probably come around asking you for more information about St Vier and his friend. Tell him

everything you can, and remember what he says for me. It will amuse me to hear what he's thinking."

She said nothing.

"Horn's a fool," he said; "you can see it yourself. Don't worry so much. I want you to do this for me."

She said, "Yes, my lord."

In the morning, Lord Horn found St Vier's note stuffed in the back of a drawer. He uncrumpled it and looked at the forceful handwriting, trying to spare his eyes its insulting message. What had Ferris said? *Every man lives at swordspoint.* It had been an epigram, after all—and a clever one, too.

chapter XIII

THE NEW NOTE WAS SEALED ON THE OUTSIDE with a thumb-print, and on the inside with the swan signet. There was only one word: *Delay*.

"D.E.," explained Alec, chalking it on the hearth with a burnt twig-end, "that spells *de*. L.A.Y., *lay*. *Delay*."

Richard eased the note into the fire, where it burned merrily for a few seconds.

"Waste of perfectly good paper," Alec protested. "It was hardly written on!"

"Never mind," Richard said; "when Tremontaine pays me the thirty advance, I can buy you a sheaf. Is that the same D that's in Richard?"

"Ver-ry good!" Alec drawled, diverted. "And in *Diane*. And *duchess*. There is, of course," he added daintily, "no D in *Alec*."

"Of course." Richard picked up a practice sword, nimbly sidestepping the small grey kitten the neighborhood cat-lady had foisted on them in return for a gift of wood ("Removing the poor thing from evil influences," Alec had said, accepting). The kitten loved moving swordpoints.

"You'll have time for Michael Godwin now," Alec said brightly.

"Horn's job? I thought you wrote him a letter."

"I did. But you could change your mind."

"I don't think so." Richard stopped, the tip of his sword just out of kitten jumping range. "Do you have something against Godwin too?"

"Not yet. But you're always complaining about being poor—"

"*You're* always complaining about being poor. I keep trying to tell you, it's a matter of challenge. You understand about boredom, don't you? Now, Halliday will be well guarded. I may have to fight several of his people before I can even reach him, unless I can plot a way to get him alone—maybe along the roofs and in through a window…"

"You know," Alec said, "you're going to kill that cat one of these days."

"No, I'm not." A barely perceptible turn of his wrist brought the blade out of its reach.

"Neat," said his friend sourly. "They should pay you to do that." He sat silent for a while, watching Richard exercise. The cat stalked the swordsman's right heel in its rhythmic dance across the floor, neither making a sound. Only the wall sent up a steady thud and crack of steel; but either the neighbors were out or they'd grown used to it. When the kitten came close, Alec darted his arm down and scooped it up. It snuggled under his chin; with one finger he absently stroked the length of its spine. He gazed between its ears at the moving swordsman, and said silkily over the exercise, "You've never actually seen the duchess, have you?"

"On the barge," Richard panted. "The fireworks."

"So did a thousand other people. You haven't spoken to her."

The swordsman jumped back, spun on his toe, and came in low. "No."

"Why should she want Halliday killed, do you think?"

Richard paused, wiping sweat out of his eyes. "It's none of my business."

"Then keep it that way."

Richard was silent. He didn't mind Alec being there watching him: Alec never paid real attention to what he was doing. He still couldn't follow a fight intelligently. Richard changed his line of attack and winced as his arm

protested: a mistake to let it stiffen in one line. His imaginary opponent parried, and he used all his reach in a complex defensive counter. His imaginary opponents were always so much better than his real ones.

"Richard."

Alec had spoken his name quite softly, but the intensity of the syllables froze him like a scream. Carefully he put the sword down, hearing its clatter loud in the tense, vibrating silence. Alec was sitting very still, with his arms wrapped around himself, but that was good: Richard checked to see that there was no knife near him, no glass he could break. It had happened once before like this, in another time that should have been easy: the sudden change in the air, and then Alec snarling and cursing at him as Richard wrested the steel from his hand, spattered with blood from Alec's ineptly sliced wrist; Alec shouting at him: "Don't you understand? I can't do anything right!" But he hadn't really been trying.

The memory was with Richard clearly now. He stood still, outwardly patient, his senses alert for the sudden movement, the twist of revelation.

"Do you understand what they meant by *Delay?*" Alec's voice was as icy clear as an actor's off the bare walls. "They want you, Richard, and they think they're going to have you." Winter light from the window turned one side of his face to silver. "Are you going to let them?"

"Not let them have me, no." He answered as he had before. "I make bargains, not pacts. They know that."

"Richard," he said with the same intense calm, "they are not pleasant people. I have never liked them."

"Well, I'll tell you something," Richard moved closer to him; "I don't like most of them myself. I don't like very many people, really."

"They like you."

"I'm nice to them, that's why. I have to be nice to them, or…"

"Or you'll kill them?"

"Or they'll get upset. I don't like it when they do that; it makes me uncomfortable."

Alec smiled thinly, the first trace of expression on his face since the conversation had begun. "And I make you comfortable?"

"It doesn't matter. You're not boring, like the rest of them."

"I'm a challenge."

"In a way, yes." Richard smiled.

"Well, that's something." Alec uncurled his arms from around his knees. "Nice to know there's one thing I'm good at."

The kitten came back to him then, looking for the warm spot he had made with his legs.

IT WAS HIS HOUSE, but Michael didn't feel right practicing there. The sword study had started out as a joke, an unorthodox skill he might in time present to society as a colorful eccentricity; but now that it was in earnest he felt the need for secrecy. He worked his practice and lesson times at Applethorpe's around his old schedule, being careful to appear when he was expected amongst his peers. He practiced early afternoons with the academy's targets, then changed into fine clothes and made a round of visits, took his dance lessons, or went riding with his friends in the hills above the city. Every other day he dined alone, early and sparsely, and walked to Applethorpe's in the twilight for lessons in the empty studio, before his round of evening entertainments began. As it grew dark they had to light candles; but both he and the Master tacitly preferred this time of day when no one else was there to observe them.

The Master was less patient with him now. The calm detachment he showed in his public lessons was no part of his personality, but a real unconcern for the achievements of his students. None of them were expected to be *swordsmen*: they learned what they could, what they wanted to, that was all. Michael was to master all that his teacher knew. It was a lot; and it was very precise. From his years of teaching, Applethorpe had learned to explain accurately the mechanics of any movement: what rhythms, stresses, and balances were brought into play, and why. And always after these explanations came the bending of his body to specification, and the imprinting of the pattern on his muscles and nerves. Michael would be caught in a frenzy of drill-work, trying to perfect a twist of the wrist that deflected the blade without moving its tip; sweat pouring down his face and breathing a nuisance since it was more hard work; and in his ears, over the roaring of his lungs, a voice like a persistent insect would be shouting, "Balance! Balance! That arm is for balance!"—one more thing to correct without losing what he'd gained. He turned once and shouted back, "Will you leave it? I can only do so much!"

The Master regarded him with a calm, sardonic gaze. "Then you are dead, and we may as well not be bothering."

Flushing, Michael dropped his eyes, following the line of his blade to its tip on the floor. "I'm sorry."

The Master persisted unemotionally, "You're not even facing an opponent yet. When you are, you have to think of where *his* arms are, as well as your own. In fact, you can't be thinking of your own at all: you have to know them. I'll show you." He picked up another blunt sword, and faced off to Michael. "Let's try it. I won't use anything you don't know."

They had drilled together before, but always in predetermined sequences. Facing him, Michael felt a thrill of nerves, excitement—and suddenly wondered whether the Master's missing arm might not be used to throw him off balance if Michael was skillful…

As instructed, he watched his opponent's eyes. Applethorpe's were like mirrors, signaling nothing, only reflecting. Michael thought suddenly of St Vier's at the bookshop, aloof and opaque. He knew that look now.

In that instant the Master struck. Michael's defense grazed the Master's sword on its return from his chest. "You're wounded," Applethorpe said. "Let's go on."

He tried to laugh, or feel admiration, but he was filled with rage. He forgot about eyes, about one-armed men; he silently ordered himself in the Master's voice: "*Feet straight—grip loose—head up…*"

He was retreating, fighting only for defense, sick with the knowledge that Applethorpe wasn't even trying to touch him. He tried at least to anticipate the attack, to have the right move ready for it; he had the feeling he was forgetting something vital he'd learned…Suddenly he found himself advancing, the Master falling back before his attack. He thought of his newest move, the little twist that could give him an opening…

"You just fell on my blade," Applethorpe said, his breathing only slightly ruffled. "Balance."

Michael dusted himself off. "Very nice," the Master said to his surprise, "for starters. Did you enjoy that?"

Michael gasped, getting his breath back. "Yes," he said. He found he was grinning. "Yes, I did."

HE MET THE DUCHESS ONCE, on an afternoon ride. She was dressed in grey velvet, and was sitting a nervous grey mare. Her face and hair gleamed above them like snow on a mountain. Her party reined in, and his followed suit. She leaned across to Lord Michael, offering him her hand to kiss, a perilous exercise that he was able to accomplish dexterously while their horses danced underneath them.

"I understand," he said over the general greetings, "that Lord Ferris has gone south to quell the riots."

"Indeed," she said; "the dictates of responsibility. And such dreadful weather for traveling, too." His pulse was beating so hard he was afraid she might see it disturbing the ruffles over his throat. "And how is your new horse?"

He didn't know what she was talking about.

"One hears you are off to the stables a good deal," she elucidated.

Someone was spying on him. Or was it just a rumor to account for his absences? He may have started it himself. Did it mean he'd have to get a horse now? He smiled back at her. "Your ladyship looks quite charming. I hope your lovely mount is not too tiring."

"Not at all."

Her eyes, her silvery eyes like mirrors…He knew that look now, and knew how to respond to it. There was her challenge to be met—met, not fled with backward glances over his shoulder to make sure she was pursuing him. It was she, in a way, who had set him on his current road with her taunting. Someday she might learn of it, and wonder. It did not occur to him yet that in attaching himself to the discipline of the sword he had already met the first part of her challenge.

He steeled his own eyes as well as he could, knowing that, with their sea color, they would never be as immutably hard as he would like. And he smiled at her. "Madam, perhaps I might have the pleasure of calling on you soon."

"Indeed, it may be soon."

The wind blew her words away from him; but that was what he thought she said. Their parties were separating amid laughter and the jingling of harness. In a few days, a week…He rode on into the hills, without looking back.

chapter XIV

TWO MORE WEEKS PASSED in Riverside without word from the one-eyed nobleman. Richard and Alec amused themselves spending the last of the winter garden money. Minor swordsmen whose reputations needed improvement found that once again St Vier would fight them, if they offended his friend first. No one had done it so far and lived; it became the kind of wild sport that fashion imposes on the restlessness of winter's end. Alec seemed to sense them, before they'd even opened their mouths; it was he as often as they who led the attack. He said it amused him to give Richard something to do. But he provoked them even when Richard wasn't there, smelling out the bravos, the ones with violence in their blood, raising their flow of viciousness like the moon calling the tide. Sometimes it was only the reputation Richard had built for him that saved his life. It always made him savage.

Besides self-destruction, his newest obsession was the theater. He had always loved it; for once he had the money, and someone controversial to be seen with at it. Richard had been to the theater a few times when he first came to the city, but it was hard for him to understand the appeal: he found the plays contrived, and the spectacle unconvincing. Finally, though, to quiet Alec—and take his mind off Horn and Tremontaine—he agreed to go when the theater opened soon.

"And I have just the play," Alec said happily. "It's called *The Swordsman's Tragedy*. You'll love it. It's all about people killing each other."

"Does it have swordplay in it?"

"Actors."

"They can't be very good."

"That's not the point," Alec informed him. "They are excellent actors. Blackwell's troupe, who did Her *Other Gown* three years ago. They're better at tragedy, though. Oh, you will enjoy it! It will cause such a stir."

"Why?" he asked, and Alec smiled mysteriously: "Ask Hugo."

He cornered Hugo Seville and Ginnie Vandall in the market that afternoon. "Hugo," he said, "what do you know about *The Swordsman's Tragedy*?"

Lightning swift, Hugo drew his blade. Richard had time to admire Alec's viciousness and to reach for his own weapon when he realized that Hugo had taken out his sword only to spit on it, and was carefully rubbing the spit into the blade with his thumb. With a sigh he resheathed it, never having noticed what St Vier had been about to do.

"Don't," said Hugo, "go messing with the Tragedy."

"Why not?"

Ginnie looked at him closely. "You've been here how long—six years, seven? And no one's told you about the Tragedy?"

"I don't pay much attention to the theater. But it's playing now across the river. Alec wants to go."

Ginnie's eyes narrowed. "Let him go without you."

"I don't think he wants to. Can you tell me about it?"

Ginnie raised her eyebrows in an expressive sigh. She leaned her head against her lover's shoulder and murmured, "Walk off for a while, Hugo. See if Edith has some new rings."

"I'm sorry," said Richard. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"Never mind." Ginnie pulled her velvet cloak more tightly around her and walked close to St Vier. She was scented with musk, like a great lady. She spoke softly, as though passing him stolen goods: "Here it is, then. The Tragedy was first played about twenty-five years back. The actor playing the —you know, the lead, was killed in a freak accident onstage. They kept playing it, though, because it was so popular. And everything seemed all right. Then people started to notice…Every swordsman that's gone to see it has lost his next fight," she hissed; then she shrugged, trying to make light of it: "Some badly, some not. We don't go see it, that's all. It's a good thing I told you. If people see you there, they'll think you're unlucky. And *don't* say the name."

Alec was right: it did make the prospect of going to the theater more appealing.

ALEC GREETED RICHARD'S DECISION JUBILANTLY. "We shall sit in the gallery where we can see everything," he announced, "and get a bag of raisins and almonds to throw at the actors."

"Will people be able to see us, too?" He couldn't imagine that that wasn't the point in going.

"I expect…" said Alec evasively. Suddenly he turned to Richard with a dangerous gleam in his eye. "Clothes," he stated. "You must wear something…splendid."

"I don't own anything splendid. Not what you're thinking of, anyway."

"Then you must get something."

He did not like the fashionable tailor's. It made him nervous to stand still while the man attacked him with chalk and tape and pins for his measurements, muttering strange formulae under his breath. Alec was perfectly composed; but then, Alec had nothing to do but finger bolts of cloth presented by the goggling staff.

"There," Richard pointed with all he had free, his chin, "that one's good."

"It's brown," Alec said acidly, "just like everything else you own."

"I like brown. What's it made of?"

"Silk velvet," Alec said with satisfaction, "that stuff you said you wouldn't have."

"Well, I don't have any use for it," he said reasonably. "Where would I wear velvet?"

"The same place you wear brown wool."

"All right," he conceded the color. "What about black, then?"

"Black," Alec said in tones of deep disgust. "Black is for grandmothers. Black is for stage villains."

"Oh, do what you like." Richard's temper was considerably shortened by the tape and the hovering hands. "So long as it's not gaudy."

"Is burgundy gaudy?" Alec asked with aggressive meekness. "Or blue, perhaps?"

"Not that *peacock* color you liked just now."

"That was an indigo," the tailor observed. "Very fine. Lord Ferris had a coat made in it at the start of the season, sir."

Alec smiled wickedly. "Then by all means, Richard, you must have one too. It matches both your eyes."

St Vier's fingers drummed on his thigh. He pointed to a bolt draped over a chair. "That?"

"A very fine wool, sir, not much like it left this year. It's a russet, known this season as Apples of Delight, or Autumn Glory."

"I don't care what it's called," Richard said over Alec's sniff, "I'll have that."

"It's brown," Alec said. "'Apples of Delight,'" he further scoffed as they left the establishment. "Peaches of Misery: another brown, like bruised fruit. Pears of Pomposity. Woeful Walnut. Cat's-Vomit Pink."

Richard touched his arm. "Wait. We didn't get you measured for anything. Didn't you want that blue?"

Alec continued down the street. Affluent shoppers moved aside from the tall shabby figure. He said to Richard, not lowering his voice, "It's probably called Hypochondriac's Veins this season. Lady Dysentery ordered a coat for her dog in it."

"Don't you want anything new for spring? I've still got the money."

"There is no point," he said, "in trying to better the bested. Nice clothes only point out my inadequacies. And I slouch: it pulls the shoulders out."

"Green," Richard insisted, having nothing against bright colors provided he didn't have to wear them, "for your eyes. And gold brocade. With a high neck, and a ruffle. You'd look elegant, Alec."

"I'd look like a painted pole at a fair," Alec said, giving his robe a tug. "One Autumn Glory is quite enough."

But on the day of the performance, Richard had his doubts. His new clothes were much more comfortable than he'd expected them to be: the richly colored wool was soft, and moved with him like something he'd had for years. Alec's scholar's robe looked even more frayed by contrast, and it covered most of his new shirt and boots. He hadn't even used the enamel clasp for his hair; it was caught back with an old ribbon.

Richard didn't bother to argue. "Sit down," he ordered. "And stay there." And he disappeared into the bedroom.

From the front room he could hear Alec saying, "What are you doing, trying to change your socks? They're perfectly clean and no one can see them anyway…"

He reappeared with a plain wooden box, the kind used for keeping letters or bills. He opened it so Alec couldn't see in, and brought out its first treasure.

"God," Alec said, and that was all he could manage.

Richard slipped the ring over Alec's finger. It was a massive black pearl, set in heavy silver scrollwork.

Alec stared at his own hand. "That's beautiful," he breathed. "I didn't know you had taste like that."

"It was given to me. A long time ago."

He took out the brooch next, and laid it in Alec's palm: a gold dragon clutching a sapphire. Alec's hand closed on it, hard enough to feel the edges; then he pinned the collar of his shirt closed with it.

"That's very, very old," he said at last.

"It was my mother's. She stole it from her family."

"The banking St Viers?"

"That's right. She didn't like them very much."

He found a small diamond ring that fitted Alec's little finger, and a gold band inlaid with a red-gold rose.

"Clients," he said, smiling down at the rose, "who liked my work. The diamond was a woman's, a nobleman's wife who gave it to me privately because she said I saved her reputation. I've always liked it, it's so fine." He reached into the box again. "This next one I got early on, as partial payment from a man with more jewels than money. I've never known what to do with it; I should have known it was for you." He brought out a square-cut emerald as big as his thumbnail, flanked by citrons and set in gold.

Alec made a peculiar noise in his throat. "Do you know what that's worth?"

"Half a job."

"You wear it. What are you giving me these for, anyway?"

"I like the way they look on you. They don't look right on me, and they don't feel right, either."

Entranced despite himself, Alec lifted his hands, now heavy with gold and silver and precious stones.

"That," said Richard, "is the way to dress you."

"You've missed a finger," Alec said, and Richard answered, "So I have," and drew out his newest acquisition, still in its pouch. "Here," he said, "you open this one."

Even in the room's dull light the ruby glowed with liquid color. It was a long red bar that spanned two knuckles, flanked on either side with diamonds set in white gold.

"Where did you get this?" Alec asked, his voice dangerously shaky.

"From another nobleman. It's my latest bribe."

"I think you're lying," Alec said tightly. "I think you got it from a thief."

"No, really," Richard said patiently. "It's from Lord Ferris. He wanted me to wear it to our next meeting."

"Well, wear it, then!" Alec shouted, thrusting the ring at him.

"I'm not comfortable in rings," Richard said quietly, and didn't take it.

"This one in particular," Alec growled. "He had no right to give it to you."

"No problem, then," Richard said, trying to turn things light again: "I give it to you, my lord."

Alec's face, if possible, grew paler and stiffer, his eyes wider. Despite the danger, Richard lifted one jeweled hand and kissed it. "Alec," he said against the cold, heavy fingers, "they are for you. Do what you want with them."

Alec's fingers slowly tightened on his own. When he looked up, Alec was smiling, his eyes sharp and green with wicked pleasure. "All right," Alec drawled, "I will." And he slid the ruby onto his forefinger. It glowed there like a live thing, an icon for the hand that bore it.

They were a noble's hands, now, a foreign prince's, rich and strange. Against the transparent skin, the high-bred bones, Alec's coarse clothing and scuffed boots faded to nothing.

"That's good," Richard said, pleased with the effect. "It's a shame to keep them all in a box. I never wear them; this way I get to look at them."

"They like to be looked at," Alec said. "I can feel them purring with delight, showy little bastards."

"Well, let's take them for a walk—not that anyone will notice them, next to my new clothes."

THE TWO MEN WERE NOTICED ALL THE WAY through Riverside. The afternoon was golden from the ground up; the snow being gone, their path was covered with mud and winter deposits. Word of what they were planning had got around; people lined up to see them pass like a parade. Richard felt like some hero, going off to war.

He caught sight of Ginnie as they were crossing the Bridge. He called to her before Alec could say something rude, "*Hey*, Ginnie! What do you think?"

She eyed him up and down, and nodded. "You look good. They'll be impressed." Alec's hand flashed in the sun; she saw the jewels, and her face froze. Without a word she turned and walked past them.

"She doesn't approve," Alec said cheerfully.

"Hugo wouldn't go see this play."

"I imagine Hugo only likes the funny ones."

Even in the city people watched as they went by. Richard kept wanting badly to giggle: all this fuss about two people going to see a play that probably wasn't even going to be very good. "We should have hired horses," he said, "like the Council Lords, so people could see us ride by. My boots are muddy already."

"Look!" Alec cried. "The banners! We're almost there."

"Banners?" But there they were, just like a story-castle's: made of bright cloth, painted with devices that appeared and vanished in the crackling wind: a winged horse, roses, dragons, a crown…

Outside the theater it was like a fair. Grooms were walking horses and clearing the way for carriages while girls walked amongst them, selling bouquets of flowers and herbs, cups of wine, and packets of fruit and nuts. There were printed copies of the play, and scarves, and ribbons the same colors as the banners. Alec looked for Nimble Willie in the crowd but couldn't find him, although one or two of the other melting faces looked familiar. Two unknown swordsmen staged a quarrel and then a swordfight over and over in different corners of the yard. Against the wall someone was declaiming a speech from another tragedy and being drowned out by a blind fiddler with a dancing dog, which some young noblemen were

distracting by throwing nuts for it to fetch. The nobles' costumes did indeed make Richard's look somber. Even the middle city people, shopkeepers and craftsmen, were dressed extravagantly, trimmed up with bits of lace and ribbon. They were coming early, to ensure themselves good seats.

"Come on," said Alec, elbowing his way through the crowd, "or we'll find ourselves sitting in some dowager's lap."

The nobles stopped throwing nuts to look at them. A snatch of their conversation carried over: "…can't afford him anyway…" A pair of serving-girls, arm in arm, simpered and turned away.

Richard was beginning to be sorry he'd come. The crowd grew tighter as they reached the entryway. Other people's toes and elbows and very breath intruded on him. He kept his hand on the pommel of his sword.

This fascinated a group of small boys, one of whom finally grew bold enough to approach. "Hey, swordsman!" he shouted hoarsely. "Could you kill my brother?"

Richard didn't answer; they always asked that. "Shut up, Harry," another said. "Can't you even see that's St Vier?"

"Hey, are you St Vier? Hey, St Vier, could I see your sword?"

"You can see it up your backside," said Alec, hitting one of them at point-blank range with an almond. Pleased with his aim, he led the way in, and tipped a boy to find them seats.

They got a private box in the upper gallery, directly opposite the stage. Alec was elated. "I've always wanted one of these. It's pure hell on the benches, with every idiot and his wife trying to sit on your lap." Richard winced at the thought. They were high above everything here, with a good view of the stage how bathed in sunlight. People were craning up to look at them from all corners of the house.

Alec put his feet up on the barrier and ate some of his raisins. There was a sennet of trumpets from above. "Now you'll see the nobles' boxes fill," Alec said. "They always come in now."

Set close to the stage, the nobles' boxes, hung with their occupants' arms, were visible from almost all the rest of the audience.

It was the first time in many years that Richard was able to observe them all at leisure. He recognized more than he expected to: handsome men who had stalked him at the parties he used to attend; distinguished

noblemen and -women whose money and patronage he'd refused, and others who had reason to be grateful.

He saw Lord Bertram Rossillion with a beautiful dark-haired woman on his arm, remembered him complaining about pressure to marry…poor lady. Alintyre was there, now Lord Hemmyng. He wondered if Hemmyng would recognize the emerald on Alec's hand and smiled, remembering that mad ride through the hills with the coach just ahead of them, Alintyre's lady love being trundled off to her aunt's; and her shrieks of laughter as they'd ridden back with her the way they'd come. He looked harder at the stately lady smiling up at Hemmyng, and recognized with a start the tilt of the nose…

The man responsible for Alec's rose gold ring was also there, looking young and serene as ever. Of course, it hadn't been so many years ago. He was talking to an elegant redhead.

"Godwin," said Alec. "One of those delectable confections you're staring at is a Godwin of Amberleigh, there's the crest."

"The redhead," Richard said. "I've seen him somewhere else before, I can't think where…"

"How do you know it isn't the other one?"

Richard smiled. "I've seen him before, too; but I remember where."

LORD THOMAS BEROWNE TURNED BACK TO HIS COMPANION. "And there it is," he said; "he did come after all."

"Why shouldn't he?" Lord Michael answered. "He's not a coward."

"No, but he's not flashy either. It's a flashy thing to do."

"For a swordsman. Is he superstitious?"

"Doesn't matter. Alban was sure he wouldn't come; he owes Lucius twenty royals now."

"He can afford it," Michael said absently. His mind wasn't on St Vier: he was wondering what Vincent Applethorpe would say if he knew Michael was attending *The Swordsman's Tragedy*. "It's just a fairy tale," he said aloud, "No one really believes it."

"Maybe not," said Tom; "but wait for the betting when St Vier's next fight comes up."

"He's stolen Halliday's fire, at any rate," Michael changed the subject. "They were saying that the Crescent was planning to cancel the

performance, close down the theater."

"Where have you *been*, Michael?" Berowne asked in mock surprise. "They were talking about *The King's End*, which is a piece of garbage saved only by the presence of one Miss Viola Festin as the king's page. I have already seen it twice, and I can assure you that Lord Halliday was at the last performance. All of it. I came in partway through, when the gentle page—"

"Oh, no," Michael said. "It's Horn. In the box across from us."

"He's probably bet on St Vier. What's the matter?"

"Tell me if he's looking at me."

"He isn't. Poor child, has he been pestering you with his attentions? Or do you owe him money?"

"He makes my skin creep," Michael explained.

"Oh, yes," Berowne said; "I know about that."

THEY'RE ALL BETTING ON YOU," Alec said cheerfully, passing him the raisins. "I wish we could get a percentage."

"It comes out of my fees," Richard answered. "When does the play start?"

"Soon, soon; when the music stops."

"What music?"

"There—onstage. You can't hear it, everyone's talking."

"And looking at us," Richard said. It was beginning to seem like a bad idea again.

"They're protecting their investments," Alec said blithely. "I wonder if they'll send you flowers."

Richard groaned. "Flowers. Is Ferris here? What does his crest look like?"

"He's not here. Lord Horn is. No Halliday. No Tremontaine. Nobody serious comes to see us."

LOOK AWAY," SAID LORD THOMAS, "he's looking at you."

"Horn?"

"No, St Vier."

"He's probably looking at *you*," Michael said.

"I'm not blushing, he can't be." Berowne looked pointedly away. "Now Horn's looking…not at you, at him."

"Who's that with him?"

"With Horn?"

"With St Vier. Thomas, turn around and *look*."

"I can't. I'm blushing. It's the curse of my complexion."

"At least you don't freckle. Send him a note—the swordsman, I mean. Ask him to join us."

"Michael." Lord Thomas looked at his friend. "You offend my pride. Everyone is dying to ask him to join them. I refuse to herd with the common throng. I refuse to be the first to capitulate. And what if he refused?"

I THINK," RICHARD SAID CROSSLY, "that I am not going to like this play. I think it's going to be a silly play. I think we should mess everyone's bets up by leaving now."

"We could do that," Alec said. "But those people who have begun walking around onstage are in fact the actors. Soon they will begin to speak. If you go now you will be walking out in the middle of the first scene, and everyone will stare at you even more. Sit down, Richard. Here comes the duke."

The duke crossed the stage in great panoply, leaving behind some courtiers who wanted to talk about him. It sounded very much like an actual conversation except that all the words were ordered to fit a spoken rhythm. Like music, fragments were passed from speaker to speaker, while the rhythm stayed the same. Sometimes you lost the feel of the beat, but then a strange twist of words brought it back again. The courtiers liked the duke. He was a wise man,

> *…more fit to act the part of grace*
> *Than counterfeit a prince's righteous scorn.*

His son and heir, however, had never been known to show any sign of grace. No one liked him much; he threw gloomy parties, and wore black in mourning for his mother, who had died giving birth to his only sister, Gratiana.

The courtiers left the stage. Some curtains at the back opened, and there was a girl with long golden hair talking to a parrot in a cage. She

called herself

> *…unhappy Gratiana—and yet most happy*
> *In having that which, lacking, many maids*
> *Must lie in torment on their narrow cots*
> *Or venture rites under full-mooned skies.*

Richard thought it might be a real parrot. She told it:

> *You and I, bright captives both*
> *Of place and person, circumstance and birth*
> *Must share our burden, you with patient ear*
> *And I with tongue to tell the cause for tears!*

But before she could explain herself, her brother Filio came in, made snide remarks about her maiden virtue and the parrot, and turned to the audience to remark:

> For *none dares share my sorrow or my joy*
> *When I myself can neither either prove.*

Richard had been looking forward to seeing the old, virtuous duke; since he was the person everyone was talking about at the beginning, he'd thought the play would be about him. Instead he died suddenly, offstage, and Filio was named duke. A stately minister with a long white beard came to tell Gratiana. His name was Yadso, and he suspected foul play. Later he was warned by his barber, who also shaved a close friend of Filio's, that his life was in danger of mortal challenge if he did not flee the country at once. Yadso took his leave of the girl:

> *Not all that is, is as it seems. In knots*
> *Truth ties up silence; speech undoes us here.*
> *The game's afoot: Now foot we while we may!*

Gratiana cried,

> *Flee! Flee! you just and true*

And for your coin take Gratiana's love!

Then, alone, she lamented her treachery to all mankind. Perhaps she was the villain? But no; it turned out she only meant that she had fallen in love with an unsuitable man. The parrot suddenly chose to echo her words: "Love!" it croaked. "Flee love!" Everyone took it in their stride, so it must have been part of the play. Maybe it wasn't a real parrot after all; or maybe it was, but someone was behind the scenes doing its voice.

The new duke kept pestering his sister. Finally he dragged out of her the fact that she was in love with a swordsman. He turned again to the audience and vented his rage in terms uncomplimentary to the profession. Richard caught Alec sneaking looks at him, and grinned. But to his sister, Filio was all sugary sympathy. Virtue, he said, like wine, was no less potent for being poured into unlikely vessels; wine could be drunk as easily from a skull as from a cup of gold. "Oh, dear," Richard muttered. He could see it coming already. Alec shushed him. But Gratiana was comforted, and promised to send her lover to meet her brother. As soon as she left, Filio stomped and shouted and wrung the parrot's neck. So it was either well trained, or a fake one after all. The duke left the stage to try and find a cat to blame it on.

Richard didn't even bother to criticize the swordsman. Maybe, when the play had been written, swordsmen were like that. Of course, in a world where everyone talked in what Alec said was poetry, why should he expect a swordsman to be any different? Duke Filio greeted his prospective brother-in-law warmly. They drank wine out of twin skulls. The swordsman made a weak joke about it, and then toasted the downfall of all the duke's house's enemies. It turned out Filio had a job for the swordsman to do: an enemy had besmirched the honor of the house, and only blood would wash it clean. Obviously flattered at the duke's attentions, the swordsman agreed.

There followed a scene in a madhouse, with much singing and dancing. What it was doing there Richard never did find out; but when it was over the inner curtain was pulled back to reveal an enormous staircase that cleft the center of the stage from top to bottom. The swordsman appeared at the bottom, announced to everyone that it was midnight, and that, after he'd got the duke's little commission out of the way, he trusted to lie in his

lover's arms as promised. Richard enjoyed his description of love; it was the most accurate part of the play so far, with its images of hot and cold, pleasure and pain. But at the same time, it made him uncomfortable to hear someone talking about it in front of a great crowd of strangers—even though it was only a play.

At the top of the stairs, a cloaked figure appeared. As the bells began to toll twelve the figure started down the stairs in a pretty flourish of yards of cloak. The swordsman drew his steel, and ran his victim through, crying, "So perish all Filio's enemies!"

"For shame," said Gratiana, falling forward into his arms; "to love my brother more than you love me!"

She was a long time dying, while each of the lovers explained the duke's trick to the other, and promised eternal fidelity. Richard endured it with patience. Finally, the swordsman carried his dead love off the stage, her cloak trailing behind them.

The stage was bare. Then people started clapping. Alec was still staring at the empty stage. His eyes were bright with the same elation he'd had the night of the fireworks.

"That was excellent!" he said. "That was perfect."

Richard decided not to argue; but Alec correctly interpreted the look on his face, and made a face of his own. "Let me guess. The technique was bad. *You* would have killed her so she didn't have time for that speech at the end."

Richard scowled a smile. "It wasn't realistic," he said at last. "No, not the speech, the way it happened. First of all, he was an idiot to take a contract on an unknown mark, especially from that brother, who he didn't trust in the first place."

"But he *needed* the duke's support, that's the point!"

"Yes, but remember when Filio says…" To Alec's surprise, his illiterate friend quoted the passage back to him accurately. "*That's* when he should have realized that he had no intention of letting them get away with it."

"Well…" said Alec, at a loss. "Well, *we* see that, but he isn't supposed to."

"Then he's supposed to be a stupid man, and I don't see why we should care what happens to him. The brother's the smart one, really."

"Then you can cheer for the brother," Alec said sourly. "But I warn you, he gets killed in the end. Everyone does, in fact."

Richard looked down at the audience, who were milling around buying food and drink and trying to look into their box. "If they want to see people killed, why don't they go to a swordfight?"

"Because your speeches are too short," Alec snapped. "Also," he reflected more leniently, "you're always doing it for money. In the play it's for love, or treachery. Makes it more interesting."

"He should never have bargained with the brother. He lost the moment he let him see his weakness."

"And we could all have gone home early."

There was a scratch at the door of their box. Richard whirled, hand on his hilt. Alec unlocked the door, and accepted the first messenger's offering.

"It's just a rose. No note."

Richard looked across the theater to the nobleman who loved roses; but he was deep in conversation, and didn't look up.

There was plenty of time between the acts for the nobles to socialize in each other's boxes. Michael relinquished the pleasures of his friend for a talk that Bertram Rossillion seemed bent on having.

"Your friend," Bertram said, "Berowne…"

"He's a relation," Michael answered the question. "By marriage. On my mother's side. We've known each other forever."

Bertram's soulful brown gaze slopped itself all over his face, with particular emphasis on the eyes. Michael stepped back, but Bertram came on. Michael said in an undertone, "Tonight is bad for me, my dear. I'll be out late, and too tired when I come in." He was going to Applethorpe's. Tiny creases appeared around Bertram's eyes, and his mouth pinched in the corners. "I've missed you terribly," Michael said, gazing back. "You don't know how…"

"Look!" said Bertram, "the duchess."

She was entering one of the boxes across the way. Already her footmen were unfurling the Tremontaine banner. Her dark skirts billowed around her, and under a tiny hat crowned with ostrich plumes her fair curls tumbled, each in careful disorder.

"She's late if she's come to see the play," Richard observed. All eyes were off them for the moment.

"She hasn't," Alex answered gruffly. "She's come to make trouble." He stood at the back of the box, huddled into the corner by the door. His hands were tucked in his sleeves, making him look more than ever like a sulky black bird.

Richard looked at the tiny, elegant woman surrounded by her well-built edifice of clothes and manners. "I wonder," he said, "if I should go and see her?"

"You can see her perfectly well from here, she's taken care of that."

"I mean to talk to. Ferris is gone, he doesn't have to know I've done it. You're right, you know; I should find out what she thinks herself."

He'd expected Alec to be pleased; after all, it was his misgivings Richard was trying to allay. But the tall man only shrugged. "She hasn't invited you, Richard. And she's not going to admit to anything."

"If I made it a condition of the job…?"

"Oh, of course," the light voice mocked angrily. "If *you* make conditions…Why don't you ask her to do your laundry, as well? I'm telling you, stay away—"

A knock interrupted him. He flung open the door, so that it crashed against the wall. A footman in the Tremontaine swan livery filled the doorway. Alec dropped the door latch as though it had burnt him.

"The duchess's compliments," the servant said to St Vier, "and will you join her to take chocolate."

Alec groaned. Richard had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. He glanced at Alec, but the scholar was once again trying to hunch himself into nonentity. "I'll be delighted." He looked around at the accumulated greenery. "Should I take her some flowers?"

"It's an insult," Alec said hollowly, "to the senders. Save them to throw at the actors."

"All right. Are you coming?"

"No. Stay there for the last act, if she'll let you; you'll be close enough to tell if Jasperino really is wearing a wig."

Richard began to follow the footman. "Wait," said Alec. He was twisting the ring on his forefinger.

"Should I wear the ruby?" St Vier asked.

"No." Alec shook his head fiercely.

For a moment Richard broke away from the footman's presence. "What's the matter?" Alec's nervousness was physically palpable to him. Something had undermined Alec's arrogance; he didn't even deny the charge. He retained just enough of his usual air to press his fingers to his brow in mockery of the acting. "I have a headache. I'm going home."

"I'll come with you."

"And leave the duchess waiting? She probably wants to find out who your tailor is. Hurry up, or you'll miss the chocolate. Oh, and if there are any little iced cakes, get me one. Say it's for your parakeet or something. I am uncommonly fond of little iced cakes."

NOT LONG AFTER HE LEFT THE THEATER Alec realized that he was probably being followed. At least, the same two men seemed to have been behind him for several turnings now. They were the demonstration swordsmen from outside the theater. They weren't Riversiders, they couldn't be going his way to the Bridge. His heart was clanging like a blacksmith's anvil, but Alec refused to alter his pace. If they wanted the rings, he supposed they could have them. Richard or his friends could probably get them back.

He might still return to the theater; lead them there by another route, and find Richard. He discarded the idea as soon as he'd had it. He wasn't going back. The shops and houses went by like images from another life. Inns and taverns passed, while his mouth grew steadily drier. It was not unlike the effects of poppy juice.

If he got as far as the Bridge, he might see other Riversiders who could help him, or at least tell Richard what had become of him. What *was* going to happen to him? They were letting him get far from the center of the city, into the lonely area you had to cross to reach the Bridge. It would be violent, and extremely painful; all he'd ever imagined, and probably something he'd managed to leave out. He'd been waiting a long time for it, and now it was going to happen.

Now, the ground said, each time his boot sole struck it. *Now.* He tried to vary the rhythm of his walk, to get it to stop. He managed to slow it down to a whisper, and in the shadow of a gateway they caught him.

He had time to say, "You know, your swordplay would make a cat laugh"; and then he found that it was impossible not to struggle.

"THEY ARE ALL JEALOUS," THE DUCHESS SAID, nodding graciously at her peers across the theater, "because they are all cowards."

Richard St Vier and the duchess were alone in the box, with the chaperonage of about five hundred spectators. It didn't bother him; he was intrigued with her portable silver chocolate set. A blue flame heated the water under a little steel-bottomed pot suspended over it on a chain. There was a silver whisk, and china cups with her arms on them.

"They're not as well equipped," he answered her.

"They could have been. Not only cowards, but stupid." It was all said in a pleasant, intimate manner that took the sting out of her words, as though they were not meant so much to denigrate the others as to establish the boundaries of a charmed circle that included only the duchess and himself. Alec did the same thing; much more abrasively, of course, and more sincerely; but the sense it gave Richard of belonging to an elite was the same.

"You might have brought your servant, he would have been welcome. Perhaps I failed to make that clear to Grayson."

He smiled, realizing she meant Alec. "He's not my servant," he said. "I don't have one."

"No?" She frowned delicately. With her postures and careful expressions, she was like a series of china figurines displayed along a chronological shelf. "Then however do you manage those great town houses down there?"

She might be teasing; but he told her anyway about the manors that had been turned into rooming houses, or brothels, or taverns, or those warrens for extended families whose generations moved slowly down floors, with the youngest always at the top.

She was enchanted with it. "That would put you where, now…" looking at him critically "…in the upstairs ballroom perhaps, with room to practice —or have they turned that into the nursery?"

He smiled. "I don't have family. Just rooms: an old bedroom and I think a music room, above a…laundress."

"She must be very pleased to have such a lodger. I have wanted to tell you for some time now how much I admired your fight with Lynch—and poor de Maris, of course. Although I suppose he deserved what he got, jumping in to challenge you when it was already Lynch's fight. I imagine

Master de Maris had tired of Lord Horn's service, and wanted the chance to prove to his party guests how employable he was."

Richard considered the pretty lady with renewed respect. This was exactly his own estimation of de Maris's peculiar behavior in the winter garden. Horn's house swordsman probably thought his lord didn't give him enough chance to show off, and he wasn't really needed as a guard; who would want to kill Horn? By killing St Vier he would have won himself an instant place back at the top of the swordsmen's roster. He should never have tried it.

"My lord Karleigh will be out of the picture for some time, I think."

On the surface, it was a continuation of her compliment, assuming that Karleigh had fled because St Vier killed his champion. It was what everyone thought. But she seemed to be waiting for an answer—something in the posing of her hands, the cup held not quite touching the saucer…as though she knew that he could tell her more about the duke. He couldn't, really: he'd taken his payment and that was the end of it for him; but it meant she knew who his patron had been.

"I've never asked," he said evasively, "why the duke and his opponent insisted on such secrecy for themselves, but still chose to have their fight in public. Of course I've honored my patron's wishes."

"It was an important fight," she said; "such are best well witnessed. And the duke is a vain man, as well as a quarrelsome one. He never told you what the fight was about, then?"

She left him little space for an ambiguous answer. "He never told me anything," he said truthfully.

"But now it may be coming clear. A political issue, worth a couple of swordsmen but not their patrons' lives. It put a healthy fear into Karleigh, but that may be wearing off. Lord Ferris will know when he returns from his trip south whether the duke stands in need of another sovereign dose."

Did she want Halliday killed *and* Karleigh out of the way? It meant destroying two opponents, and leaving the field open for a third man… Ferris? The duchess hadn't named Halliday; if anything, she seemed to be defending him. Richard gave up: he didn't know enough about the nobles and their schemes this year to figure it out. But one thing still troubled him.

He looked at the duchess directly. "I am already at your service."

"Gallant," the duchess chuckled. "Are you really, now?"

She made him feel young—young, but very secure in the hands of someone who knew what she was about. He said broadly, to be sure, "You know how to find me."

"Do I?" she said with the same amusement.

"Well, your friends do," he amended.

"Ah." She seemed satisfied; and so, for the moment, was he. He hoped Alec would be, too. Trumpets sounded for the play to begin again. "Do stay," said the duchess; "you can get such a good view of the costumes from here. Some of the wigs are beyond belief."

THE SWORDSMAN WHOSE TRAGEDY IT WAS lasted until the end. His revenge against the evil duke consisted of a series of love letters from an unknown lady with the same initials as Filio's mother, whom the duke fell in love with. The letters demanded that the duke do increasingly odious things to prove his devotion. After a colorful series of rapes, beheadings, and one disinterment, even the most loyal of Duke Filio's courtiers had amassed several reasons to kill him. The only nice person left onstage, a doctor from the singing madhouse, stated the opinion that the prognosis for the duke's mental health was not good.

In the final act, the giant staircase again dominated the stage. The duke, laboring under the promise that the lady of his affections would at last reveal herself to him at midnight, came to the bottommost step. As the bell once again tolled the hour, the figure of his sister, wrapped in her bloody cloak, appeared above him. Too unhinged to be adequately frightened, he muttered,

> *Nay, I'll not flee, but mount the tow'r of heaven*
> *And from your chaste and softly smiling lips*
> *Suck forth the secret of eternal life!*

The duke ran up the staircase, but suddenly the figure flung back its hood. To no one's surprise except the duke's, it was the swordsman:

> *Not life, but death's cold secrets will you kiss—*
> *Now please your mistress, let her give you joy*
> *Of her. Come, come, and bid farewell to all*

Earth's pleasures in one last ecstatic howl.

His gleaming sword plunged down from above into Filio's heart (leaving his own front completely unguarded, but affording a fine view of his gory clothes), and the duke screamed, "At last! It is the end!"

It wasn't, of course. The duke had no final speech, but a crowd of courtiers came running on. Finding the duke in the arms of a cloaked figure, presumably his mysterious lover, they shouted, "Vengeance! Vengeance!" and fell upon the pair, hacking to bits the already dead duke, and delivering to the swordsman his mortal wound. It left him strength for one last declamation:

Now is the trapper trapped, and in my blood
Steel strikes on steel, and kindles a great flame.
I burn, I rage, and shortly welcome death
That long has been my handmaid, now my spouse.
Are there no tears to put this fire out?
Only my own, and those I will not shed
So long as he *regards me with his sanguine orbs.*
We'll too soon be two skulls, and jest at grinning then,
But all our plays produce no single laugh
From lungs no sighs will ever fill again.
I hadn't planned on this—but hadn't planned
Beyond it, either. Things were clear enough:
I loved your sister, and I hated you,
Pursued you both and killed you. Now all's one.
Write Nothing on my tomb, that's all…I've done.

The swordsman was by then halfway up the staircase, where he died. While everyone was reacting to this, a nobleman rushed in to announce that a chimney sweep had discovered the duke's secret diary, in which were lovingly detailed all his heinous crimes, beginning with his treatment of his sister. The people agreed that the swordsman was, in fact, a hero, and would be given a hero's funeral, interred next to Gratiana, while the duke would be cast into a bottomless pit. The virtuous and amiable old

counselor, Yadso, would be called back from exile to become the next duke of wherever it was. And that was the end.

The audience's applause seemed as much for the happy resolution as for the actors. As they took their bows the duchess observed to St Vier, "In the end, you see, it all comes down to good government. There can be no state funeral for the hero without a state; and true lovers cannot meet on a staircase that hasn't been properly maintained. I'm sure Yadso will make an excellent duke."

Richard enjoyed the clear path the duchess's footman commanded for them out of the theater. It would be pleasant to live in a world without crowds. At the door of her carriage she stopped and took a basket from her maid, rummaged in it, and handed him a packet wrapped in a linen napkin. Bowing, he heard the swish of her skirts as she was handed up into the carriage. Then he left quickly, before any other of the departing nobles might claim his company. He did note that the Hallidays' phoenix-crested carriage had a door that locked from the inside.

THE PACKET CONTAINED THE LITTLE ICED CAKES he had forgotten to ask for. He wondered if they meant something; but determined to save them intact for Alec.

There was no sign of his friend's having been home to their lodgings. Probably off losing his last brass minnow at Rosalie's. Richard hoped he wasn't staking his rings. He decided to go down there and get some dinner.

The cooking fire was high; it was hot as the inferno in the little tavern, though fortunately not so dry. Rosalie wanted to hear all about the play; and because she was an old friend he told her. Lucie wanted to know about the heroine's costume; but he never could remember clothes. News of his visit with the duchess didn't seem to have leaked down yet.

Some men came in and looked at him curiously, as though afraid his bad luck might be fresh enough to rub off on them. They settled down in a corner to eat and play cards. Eventually another man joined them, sporting a kerchief full of stolen goods he was attempting to sell quickly.

"Here," called Rosalie, "let's see those things."

She was admiring an enamel comb, letting Lucie twine it in her hair, when Richard saw the gold ring among the tangle of chains and gew-gaws. Yellow gold, with a red rose.

"Where did you get this?" he asked the man calmly.

"Trade secret." The man laid a finger along the side of his nose. "Do you want it?"

"It's mine."

"Not any more, boy."

"Tell me where you got it," St Vier said, a weary edge to his voice. "It isn't worth fighting over."

The man swore. "Swordsmen." But he gave in. "Some guy passed it on to me, down at the docks. Another swordsman, not Riverside though. Still a sight more civil than you, honey. He just wanted the money for it; I didn't ask any questions. What's the matter, you get robbed when you went out without your sword?"

"I don't get robbed."

Taking a cautious step back, the man mocked, "You're plenty sure of yourself. I bet you're St Vier or something, right?"

"I am St Vier," Richard said quietly. At his side, Rosalie nodded. "When did you get the ring?"

"Not long—hey, look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Just tell me when you got it."

"Not long ago. I came straight here. You'll never find him, though, not now."

"I'll find him," Richard said.

chapter XV

DURING THE LONG CARRIAGE RIDE Lord Horn had the leisure to examine his feelings minutely. They were, on the whole, pleasant feelings. Throughout the play he had barely paid heed to the stage, so pleased was he with the events unfolding from his own private gallery. He felt like a playwright, only he had not had to go to the trouble of inventing his characters: Lord Michael Godwin, blissfully young and arrogant, all the more lovely because his days under the sun were now numbered…Horn had thought of sending him a trenchant note; but a distinguished silence had seemed the most dignified…the swordsman St Vier, that fashionable paragon…in the sunlight, in the great public space, he too had looked young, his detachment a mere defense. Horn had enjoyed looking at the dangerous man and thinking how helpless he was about to feel.

The coach pulled up at last at the door of the empty hunting lodge. There were still some people left who owed him favors. St Vier's young man should have arrived here over an hour ago. Horn had stayed for the end of the play. He should find the boy chained in the empty buttery. Ferris's woman had said he couldn't fight, but these Riversiders knew all kinds of tricks, and how could you be sure that St Vier hadn't passed some on to him?

Up here in the hills, the spring was still chilly. Horn kept his cloak on and went straight to the buttery. A small sliding panel in the door, some

watchman's convenience, had been left open. He could look through it without being seen, and he did.

The young man was lounging upright in his chains, making them look faintly ridiculous as he leaned against the wall. His hands were lax, long, and useless-looking. They were covered with rings, and there was gold at his throat. His dress was strangely at odds: the jewels, good boots, and shirt, under a jacket with narrow shoulders and too-short sleeves whose cut was a good five seasons old. His breeches, which no longer matched his jacket, had a piece of braid coming off them. And then there was his cascade of hair. In the candlelight he had been left with, it glowed chestnut and sable, heavy and thick as poured cream.

Some black cloth was folded behind his head to keep it from the wall. He was looking abstractedly across at the candle, head slightly tilted, his eyes veiled.

Lord Horn examined the face of St Vier's lover. His nose was long, flat-planed like a ritual painting's. High cheekbones, wide-set so that the eyes above them looked slanted from this angle. The hair pulled back from his high forehead made his face look even longer. Horn's eyes rested on the mouth, almost too wide for the narrow face. Even in repose, the flat lips looked mocking and sensual.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside. At the sound the young man raised his head like a deer scenting the wind. His eyes were vivid green, and open preternaturally wide; they held Lord Horn in frozen fascination, so that his first words were not at all what he'd planned.

"Who are you?"

"Your prisoner, I am told." The wide gaze did not falter, but Horn saw that the skin around his eyes was drawn tight with tension. "Are you going to kill me?"

Horn ignored the question, and noted how the face went paler. "Your name?" he demanded.

"It's Alec." The boy wet his lips. "May I have some water?"

"Later. And your surname?"

He shook his head. "I don't have any."

"Your father's name, then."

"Nobody wants me…" The mobile lips turned down mournfully, while above them the wild eyes glittered. "And who are you?"

"I am Lord Horn." He forgave the impertinence because it had put him back on the track of his planned opening.

"Oh," said his prisoner. "*You're* Horn, are you?"

"Yes," said Horn. "I am indeed. My—friends tell me you're a scholar. Is that so?"

"No!" The syllable exploded with sudden vehemence.

"But you can write?"

"Of course I can write."

"Fine. I have paper and pen outside. You will write a letter to St Vier telling him that you are in my hands, and that when he has performed the job I have asked him to, you will be sent back to him. Unharmed."

You would expect the fellow to relax. If he'd thought he had been abducted by a mere thug, he knew better now. But his voice was still thin, high and breathy with fear. "Of course. What a tidy plan. And who will you have read it to him?"

"He can read it himself," Horn snapped. He found his hostage's responses unnerving: they walked the knife's edge between frivolity and terror.

"He can't read. I read them for him."

Lord Horn bit his cheek to keep from swearing. The situation seemed to be eluding him. He grasped at his proper authority. "Write it anyway."

"But don't you see," the boy said impatiently, "I can't!"

"Are you ill? Have you lost the faculty of your eyes and hands? Or are you just too stupid to realize what predicament you are in?"

The boy went even paler. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing," Horn exploded, "if you'll just stop arguing and do as I tell you!"

St Vier's lover licked his lips. "I don't want to be hurt," he said with soft desperation. "But you have to see how stupid it is to write him a letter."

Horn stepped back, as though his prisoner's insolence were a fire too hot to bear. "Do you hear what you are *saying*?" he demanded. "Are you making *me* conditions?"

"No—no—" the boy said desperately. "I'm just trying to *explain*. Can't you understand anything I'm telling you? Richard St Vier," he continued hurriedly, before Horn could object, "he isn't going to want to let anyone else see a letter with—a letter like that. He doesn't like other people

knowing his business. Anyone who reads it to him would know what your demands are, and then if he meets them, they'll know that he gave in to you. He can't have that. It's—it's his honor. So even if I write you the stupid letter, it's no good. You may," here the pale lips flattened in the ghost of a smile, "be stuck with me."

"Oh, I doubt that," the nobleman answered, smiling creamily. The boy must be bluffing, playing for time. Perhaps he expected St Vier to come riding up at the head of a band of cutthroats, storm the house, lift him to the saddlebow, and ride off into the night…"He seems to be very fond of you. I'm sure he is eager to get you back."

The green eyes were staring frankly at him, at his leg. Before he could stop himself, Horn glanced down. His own fingers were curling and uncurling against the fabric. "It must be done quickly," he said, clenching his hand into a fist at his side, and thrusting his face almost into his prisoner's. "I cannot waste time while he looks for you. I want the job done. Then he can have you back, for whatever he wants you for."

"What do you think he wants me for?" The thin voice was taut with desperation. "He can get others for that—whoever he wants. You've made a mistake."

"No mistake," Horn said, certain at last.

"Do you want money?" the boy said breathlessly. "I can get some, if that's what you want."

Lord Horn stepped back, awash in the fumes of power, poignant as pleasure. He would have what he wanted of the swordsman, and the swordsman's lover would provide him with another feast entire. His fear was strong wine, a sop to Horn's pride.

"No money," Horn snarled. "I'll have what St Vier has."

The young man flinched, his hand raised in an oddly virginal gesture of defense. Horn's teeth showed in response. He knew that game from his own pretty-boy days, the titillation and the fear combined…

For a moment, a trick of the light, he saw Lord Michael's features in the young man's face. He wouldn't dare set Godwin of Amberleigh's son in chains…but if he could! Michael Godwin would not have the chance to refuse Lord Horn again. Godwin and St Vier, with their blithe rejections! He, himself, Lindley, Lord Horn, had money; he had position; he knew what

it was to have the town at his feet, men and women begging for a letter, for a ribbon, for the touch of his mouth…

It occurred to him that if St Vier hadn't written him that letter, that short, insulting note of refusal, then someone else must have. That dark, eccentric hand might belong to the man before him. He would find out shortly.

"Why should I not want what St Vier wants?" he continued. "He will not accept money when it runs counter to his desires. Such is his honor," Horn said dryly. "Why should you expect less of me?"

"I can't help it," Alec said pathetically.

"Write the letter," snapped Horn.

"It won't do any good," Alec answered. His eyes were staring wide as though they would speak for him. His hands strained against their bonds.

Horn saw them, and saw something else. "That ring." It was a ruby, tremendously long and thin, square-cut, set in white gold, flanked at the band with little diamonds. It rode the long hand like a familiar, a fire-beast, large and cold and alive. "Give it to me."

Alec clenched his fist on it, helpless and stubborn. "No."

Horn lifted his bleached and manicured hand, and slammed it hard across the bound man's face.

Alec screamed. The shrill echoes rang in the stone room, hurting Horn's ears. He dropped his hand and jumped back.

The red marks of Horn's hand, rough as a child's tracing, were rising to the surface of the bound man's skin. He stared owlishly at Horn, not blinking away the water in his eyes.

"I'm a coward," Alec said. Horn lifted his hand again, to see the young man flinch. "I'm afraid of being hurt, I told you so. If you hurt me, I'll only scream again."

"Give me the ring."

"You're a thief," Alec said haughtily, his fear pushing him into fury, "as well as a whore. What do you want with it?"

Horn managed to restrain himself from battering the flat mobile mouth into shapelessness.

"You will do as I say, or you and your Richard are going to be very sorry."

At the swordsman's name, the strange young man stiffened. "If you harm me, my lord," he said, "it is you who will be sorry." His chin was up, his long

eyes veiled, and his voice dripped breeding and contempt.

"Oho," said Horn. "Trying that trick, are you? And whose little bastard are *you* supposed to be…*my lord?*"

The boy flinched again, although Horn hadn't raised a finger. "No one," he mumbled, hanging his head. "I'm no one, I'm nothing at all. And I'm glad of it." He looked suddenly as if he wanted to spit. "I am very, very glad of it, if you are the example I'm meant to follow."

"Insolence!" Horn hissed. Clenching his fist behind his back he said, "And I suggest you learn to control it, my young nobody. Or I will hurt you very much indeed, and no one will hear you scream."

"*You'll* hear," he said, again unable to stop himself.

"I will stuff your mouth with silk," Horn answered smoothly. "I happen to know it's very effective."

"May I have a drink first?" he asked with proper humility.

"Of course you may," said Horn. "I'm not a monster. Behave yourself, do as I say, and we'll see about making you more comfortable."

Horn pulled the ring off the long finger himself, since the chains didn't allow the boy's hands to meet. Horn wasn't stupid. The boy hadn't wanted to give it up: the ruby must mean something to St Vier.

"I shall write the note myself," he said, "and send it with the ring to St Vier at the usual tavern. As soon as the job is done, we'll consider the matter settled."

"Perhaps," Alec inquired, "you will send one of your own rings in earnest?"

Horn looked with pity at the shoddy boy. "I am a gentleman," he explained. "He knows my word is good."

THEY LET THE MESSENGER GO, and St Vier was furious.

Rosalie realized that, for all the fights settled under her roof, she had never seen him angry before. His voice wasn't raised, nor his motions unusually abrupt. Those who didn't know him well might not even notice the pallor of his face, or the quiet that hung about him like the silences between thunder. But the pleasant ring of his voice was gone; his speech was flat, without inflection:

"I said anyone. Anyone who came asking for me."

"It was only a messenger," said Sam Bonner again, at his sweetest. He was getting more conciliatory with each repetition; but he was the only one there with the grape-sodden nerve to say anything at all. There was no knowing with men like St Vier when they would decide to put a stop to all explanation. However, the swordsman remained quiet and still—if you liked that sort of stillness. Rodge and Nimble Willie glanced at each other. The little thief stepped forward. He looked up at St Vier with earnest gravity lining his childish face, and tried again.

"We did stop him, see. He was trying just to drop the packet on the table and run, but Rodge here stopped him. But he didn't know anything, see, not a thing—rabbit-scared he was, and ticklish with his steel; so we just lifted his purse and let him go. Not much in it."

"You can bet we asked first," Sam asserted; "now you know we would." ("Sam…" Rodge cautioned.) "But he didn't know a thing. Got that packet third-hand; third-hand, and didn't know a thing."

Anxiously they watched St Vier break open the wax seal. He flung the paper onto the floor. In his hand was a ruby ring. He stared at it, and they stared too. It was worth a fortune. But it didn't seem to cheer him up. Someone pressed a mug of beer into his free hand; he took it but paid no other notice.

"There's writing on that paper."

It was Ginnie Vandall, who had gone out looking for him in the other direction. "I can read," she said huskily.

Richard picked up the paper, took her elbow, and steered her out into the empty yard.

She peered at the note in the morning light. Fortunately it was full of short words. She read, slowly and carefully:

Do the Job for me at once and he will be
returned to you right away unharmed.

There was no signature.

The seal on the outside had been blank; inside, handsomely stamped in crimson wax, was the crest he'd seen on the other notes, the ones Alec had laughed at.

"Ah," said Ginnie. "That's not so good." He would have to refuse. She knew that. No swordsman could afford to be blackmailed. He had lost his Alec—not that he wouldn't be better off without the unpleasant scholar in the long run. He'd see it himself in a few days, when it had all blown over. She didn't ask whose crest it was. Someone powerful, who had wanted the best swordsman in the city very badly.

She said, "You'll want to lay quiet for a couple days. I'll tell Willie to bring the news round to you at Marie's. If you've got any appointments Hugo can—"

He looked at her as though she weren't there. "What are you talking about?" His eyes were the mute color of drowned hyacinths.

"His lordship won't like it," she explained. "The city's not a good place for you to be."

"Why not? I'm taking the job."

He handed her the full mug and walked away. At the doorway he turned, remembering to say, "Thank you, Ginnie," before he left.

For a moment she stood looking after him; then she spun on her heel and walked slowly back into the tavern.

IT WAS TRUE; he could not afford to be blackmailed. But neither would he let someone under his protection be taken away from him. And that was the more immediate problem, to which Richard St Vier addressed himself.

He had nothing against Lord Michael Godwin, and what he knew of Lord Horn he didn't like: the man was stupid, graceless, and impatient. It meant there was little chance of Richard's finding Alec before Horn gave up on him.

Unfortunately, he couldn't count on Horn being quite stupid enough to have Alec in his town house. It was a shame: Richard was good at breaking into houses. A set of plans like crystalline maps unrolled before him; but they all took time, and the note had said *at once*. There was no one on the Hill who owed him favors: Richard took care to keep himself debt-free both ways. There were people up there who might help him, if he asked, for his own sake; but it was bad enough that most of Riverside now knew about Alec's disappearance—he didn't want the whole city talking about it.

He crumpled the note in his fist. He must remember to burn it. Tonight he would challenge Godwin, take care of him, and hope that the duchess or

someone would want St Vier badly enough to protect him from the Godwin family lawyers, should the need arise. He had no faith in Horn's protection. What happened after that, St Vier would have to take care of himself.

chapter XVI

He left Riverside well before the sun set, wearing his comfortable brown clothes. He knew that most nobles were at home at that hour, getting dressed up for the evening's activities.

There were very few pedestrians on the Hill; he passed only random servants on last-minute errands. The meat and produce delivery wagons had departed with the last of their charges hours ago, leaving the cooks to their own devices; the visiting carriages were being burnished in the yards. The gates and walls of the riverward estates cast long purple shadows across the wide streets. In the shadows, night's chill had already set in. He was glad of his long cloak, chosen to hide the sword he wore. Because of the spring damp, the ruddy clay in the street was not yet dusty. In the squares of sunlight between houses it glowed golden, blocked out by shadows in geometric patterns arbitrary and beautiful.

The Godwin town house was not large, but it was set back from the street, with a conveniently corniced gate. If the lord drove or rode out, he would certainly come through it. Richard positioned himself in a shadow against the wall, and waited.

The wait gave him time, unfortunately, to think about Alec and Lord Horn. He doubted the scholar was curbing his tongue any, and hoped,

despite the note's assurance, that Alec would not be too badly damaged. These nobles were not like Riversiders: they were used to acting on their wills, they didn't understand about signs that something wasn't safe to handle, or instinct that said to let it go for now. That was what had first preserved Alec when he'd entered Riverside alone. People had sensed something not right about him, and had not exacted retribution for his offenses. But Lord Horn wouldn't be thinking that way. And Richard already knew Alec's opinion of Horn. He felt himself smile with the memory.

St Vier shrugged and shivered at the chill that had settled in the folds of his cloak. There was nothing he could do about it now: only wait, and hope Lord Michael was not too heavily attended. So far as he knew he did not have his own bodyguard; if Richard issued the formal challenge to Lord Michael on the street he would have no choice but to fight St Vier then and there. But he was a long time coming out. Richard looked at the sky. He'd give it until sundown before going up to the door to call the noble out. That was a risk, because Godwin might have some servant inside who could take the challenge for him, fight in his stead, and give Lord Michael time to flee the city before Horn could find another challenger. They were a silly bunch of rules, but they made death by duel with a professional seem less like assassination. It was all correct within the boundaries of formal challenge; but Richard doubted that Horn would be pleased, and he needed to keep him happy.

He'd challenged other young lords in his time, and was not looking forward to this. Often they made a great deal of fuss over their clothes, taking off and folding their coats as though they were going to be putting them on again. Even the ones with enough presence to strike a proper stance had hands that shook holding the sword. The only such challenge he'd ever enjoyed was one in which the lady hired him only to scar his mark distinctively.

He heard footsteps suddenly, and looked up. On the other side of the gate a small postern opened, and a man stepped out. When he turned to shut the door Richard recognized him as the red-haired nobleman who'd run after him that winter day at the bookshop, whom he'd pointed out to Alec at the theater. Lord Michael was wearing a sword. He set off down the street, without looking behind him, whistling.

He could easily catch up to him. The space in the street was good, the light not yet failed. And, wonder of wonders, it was an excellent sword from what Richard could see of it: not the nobleman's toy they usually carried. He readied himself to move, and then paused. Where was this noble sauntering off to so purposefully, on foot and without attendance, carrying a real dueling sword? He wanted to know; and he did not really relish butchering the man in front of all his neighbors. Richard decided it would do no harm to stalk Lord Michael to his destination and satisfy his curiosity. Without undue hurry, he detached himself from the shadows and set off down the Hill after his guide.

"YOU'RE LATE," OBSERVED VINCENT APPLETHORPE, looking up from the sword he was polishing one-handed, the hilt wedged between his knees.

"Sorry," Michael panted, having run up the stairs. He knew he was being accused, however mildly; and he had learned not to try to bluster his way out. He only explained, "I had some people over, and they wouldn't go away."

Applethorpe smiled slowly, secretly, into the polished blade. "You may find that stops being a problem soon. In a year or so, after you've won your first duel. People become very eager to pick up the slightest of hints from you then."

Michael grinned in return, more broadly than he'd meant to, at the thought of Lord Bertram and Lord Thomas flinching, putting down their chocolate cups, and slinking away at the sign of a yawn. He found it hard to imagine really killing anyone; and if he did someday he certainly hoped none of his friends would find out about it.

Michael stripped down to his shirt and began limbering up. The Master commented, "The Tragedy's in town. Do you know about it?"

"I…it's at Blackwell's" he answered noncommittally.

"It's not a good idea to go," the Master said, putting the sword back on the rack. It hadn't really needed polishing, but he liked to keep up contact with his blades, and he didn't like sitting idle waiting for Godwin to come. Now he could pace, watching the young man from every angle, alert to any flaw. "You want to avoid things like that."

"Is there really a curse?"

"I don't know. But it's never done anyone any good."

It satisfied him: practical, like all of Applethorpe's advice.

"Ready?"

Michael caught the practice sword that was tossed to him—possibly Master Applethorpe's only theatrical tendency, but also good for his eye. It meant the Master would be calling out orders, and his student must follow the shifting commands with precision. He hoped tonight Applethorpe would duel with him again. He was getting better at it, learning how to integrate the moves and defenses he'd been taught. It excited him—but not, any more, past skill and reason. He was learning to think and act at the same time.

"Garde!" the Master snapped, and Lord Michael sprang to the first defensive position, already tensed for the rapid command to follow. He waited a beat, two beats, but there was nothing.

"That's strange," the Master said; "there's someone coming up the stairs."

RICHARD COULDN'T THINK WHY the lord should be walking to a common hiring-stable, when he had plenty of horses at home. He watched him go in a side door, and heard the swift tread of feet on wooden stairs. In a judicious few minutes, he followed.

He took it all in at a glance: the clear space, the targets, and the two men, one without an arm, the other still at garde, both staring at him in surprise.

"Excuse me for interrupting," he said. "My name is Richard St Vier. I bear a challenge to Lord Michael Godwin, to fight past first blood, until a conclusion is reached."

"Michael," said Vincent Applethorpe calmly, "light the candles; there won't be enough daylight soon."

Carefully Michael replaced his sword in the rack. He could hear the sound of his own breathing in his ears, but he tried to get it to sound like Applethorpe's voice, steady and even. He was surprised at how well he could control his muscles, despite the racing of his blood: the tinder struck on the first try. He walked around the room, lighting the fat drippy candles, their flames pale and indefinite in the twilight, almost transparent. This was St Vier, the strange man who had bought the book of philosophy from Felman that winter's day. He remembered rather liking him; and his friend

Thomas, at the theater, had betrayed a definite interest. *He's watching you*…God, Michael thought, of course he was! He wished he had had the chance to watch St Vier fight, just once. Accidents did happen, and strokes of luck.

While Michael was making his rounds, Applethorpe came forward to greet the swordsman. "I've heard of you," he said, "of course. I'm very glad to meet you." They did not touch hands. St Vier's were inside his cloak, one resting on the pommel of his sword. They faced each other in the dim studio, two men of nearly identical height and build, but for the older man's missing arm. "My name is Vincent Applethorpe," the Master said. It was clear from St Vier's face that he'd never heard the name. "I claim the challenge."

"No!" said Michael without meaning to. He cursed as candle wax dripped onto his hand.

"I wish you wouldn't," Richard answered the Master. "It will make things harder."

"I was told you liked a challenge," Applethorpe said.

Richard compressed his lips in mild annoyance. "Of course it would be a pleasure. But I have obligations…"

"I have the right."

The wax was cooling on Michael's hand. "Master, please—it isn't your fight."

"It will be a very short fight if it is yours," Applethorpe said to him. "You won't learn a thing. It is very much my fight."

"You do have the right," St Vier admitted. "Let's begin."

"Thank you. Michael, get your sword. Now kiss the blade and promise not to interfere."

"I promise not to interfere." The steel was very cold against Michael's lips. At this angle the blade felt heavy; it seemed to pull his hand down. He made his wrist sustain the weight for an extra moment, and then saluted his teacher with it.

"Your honor's good," the Master was saying to St Vier.

"Inconveniently good," Richard sighed. "I won't touch him if you lose. If I lose, please see that word gets back to Riverside; they'll know what to do."

"Then let's begin."

And the master swordsmen began. It was all there as Michael had studied it. But now he saw the strength and grace of Applethorpe's demonstrations compacted into the little space of precious time.

Michael watched with luxurious pleasure the rise and fall of their arms, the turn of their wrists, now that he could follow what was happening. Master Applethorpe was demonstrating again, as fine and precise as at the lessons; but now there was a mirror to him, the polished, focused motions of St Vier. Michael forgot that death was at hand as, indeed, the two swordsmen seemed to have done, leisurely stroking and countering their way across the scrubbed white floor, with the high ceiling catching and returning the ring of their steel.

As the swordplay grew fiercer the sound of their breath became audible, and the nearer candle flames shuddered in their passing. It was almost too fast for Michael to follow now, moves followed up and elaborated on before he could discern them; like trying to follow an argument between two scholars fluent in a foreign language, rich with obscure textual references.

St Vier, who never spoke when fighting, gasped, "Applethorpe—why have I never heard of you?"

Vincent Applethorpe took the occasion to come in high in a corkscrew movement that turned the other swordsman in a half-circle defending himself. St Vier stumbled backward, but turned it to his advantage by crouching into a sideways dodge that Applethorpe had to swerve to avoid.

Subtly, something changed. At first Michael couldn't figure out what it was. Both men were smiling twin wolfish grins, their lips parted as much for air as for delight. Their moves were a little slower, more deliberate, but not the careful demonstration of earlier. They didn't flow into each other. There were pauses between each flurry of strokes and returns, pauses heavy with tension. The air grew thick with it; it seemed to weight their movement. The time of testing, and of playing, was over. This was the final duel for one of them. Now they were fighting for their lives—for the one life that would emerge from this elegant battle. For a moment Michael let himself think of it: that whatever happened here, he would emerge unscathed. Of course there would be things to do, people to notify…He caught his breath as St Vier was forced to lunge back into the wall, between two candles. He could see a crazy grin on the man's face as he held Applethorpe off with elaborate wristwork. For the moment the two were evenly matched, arm against arm.

Michael prayed that it would never stop, that there would always be this moment of utter mastery, beautiful and rare, and no conclusion ever be reached. St Vier knocked over a candle; it put itself out rolling on the floor. He kicked aside the table it had been on, extricating himself from the corner, and the action resumed.

RICHARD KNEW HE WAS FIGHTING FOR HIS LIFE, and he was terribly happy. In most of his fights, even the good ones, he made all the decisions: when to turn serious, whether to fight high or low…but already Applethorpe had taken that away from him. He wasn't afraid, but the edge of challenge was sharp under him, and the drop from it irrevocable. The world had narrowed to the strength of his body, the trained agility of his mind in response to his opponent. The universe began and ended within the reach of his senses, the stretch of his four limbs and the gleaming steel. It was too good to lose now, the bright point coming at him always from another angle, the clarity of his mind anticipating and returning it, creating new patterns to play…

He saw the opening and went for it, but Applethorpe countered at the last instant, pivoting clumsily so that what would have been a clean death stroke caught him raggedly across the chest.

The Master stood upright, gripping his rapier too tightly, staring straight ahead. "Michael," he said clearly, "that arm is for balance."

Blood was soaking through the sweat in his shirt, the smell of it like decaying iron overlaying the tang of exertion that still hung thick in the air. Quickly Richard caught him and eased him to the floor, supporting him on his own heaving chest. Applethorpe's breath made a liquid, tearing sound. Michael found his cloak, and spread it over his teacher's legs.

"Step back," St Vier ordered him. He leaned his head down next to Applethorpe's and murmured, "Shall I finish it?"

"No," Applethorpe rasped. "Not yet. Godwin—"

"Don't talk," Michael said.

"Let him," said Richard.

The Master's teeth were gritted, but he tried to untwist his lips to smile. "If you're good enough, this is how it ends."

Michael said, "Are you telling me to give it up?"

"No," St Vier answered over Vincent Applethorpe's hissing breath. "He's talking about the challenge. I'm sorry—you either know it or you

don't."

"Shall I get a surgeon?" Michael asked, clutching at the world he was master of.

"He doesn't need one," St Vier said. Again he bent his dark head. "Master—thank you. I do enjoy a challenge."

Vincent Applethorpe laughed in triumph, and the blood spattered everything. The marks of his fingers were still white on St Vier's wrists when he lowered the corpse to the floor.

Richard wiped his hands on the young lord's cloak, and covered the dead man with it. Without quite understanding how they had got there, Michael found himself standing across the room, facing the swordsman's commanding presence.

"You have the right to know," Richard said, "it was Lord Horn set me on. He won't be glad you're still alive, but I've fought your champion and I consider my obligation discharged. He may try again with someone else; I suggest you leave the city for a while." He caught the expected clenching of Michael's fists. "Don't try to kill Horn," he said. "I'm sure you're good enough to do it, but his life is about to become complicated; it would be better if you left." The young man only stared at him, blue-green eyes hot and bright in his white face. "Don't try to kill me either; you're surely not good enough for that."

"I wasn't going to," Michael said.

Calmly, St Vier was collecting his own belongings. "I'll report the death," he said, "and send someone to look after it. Was he married?"

"I…don't know."

"Go on." The swordsman put Michael's sword and jacket in his hands. "You shouldn't stay."

The door closed behind him, and there was nowhere to go but down the dark stairs.

Outside it was still early, a warm spring night. The sky was that perfect turquoise that sets off the first scattering of stars. Michael shivered. He had left his cloak upstairs, he was going to be cold without it—but it was no use, was it—he passed his hand over his face in an attempt to clear his thoughts, and felt a hand close around his wrist.

All the violence of the past hour exploded in his body like fireworks. He couldn't really see what he was doing through the red-gold flare, but he felt

his fist connect with flesh, his body twisting like a whirlwind, heard a long drawn-out howl like the center of a storm—and then a sharp thumping noise that heralded the most glorious set of fireworks yet, before night fell without stars.

chapter XVII

WHEN HIS VISION CLEARED HE WAS IN A COACH. His hands and feet were tied, and the curtains were drawn. His head ached, and he was thirsty. Considering how soon he would likely be dead it shouldn't matter, but he badly wanted a drink. The jouncing of the carriage over cobblestones was intolerable. Cobblestones—that meant they were somewhere on Hertimer Street, going up towards the Hill.

"Hey!" he shouted. The reverberations in his skull made him wish he hadn't; but at least he could make some trouble for someone. Something terrible had just happened, which was in some way his fault, and shouting might stave it off. "Hey, stop this thing at once!"

The only answer he got—or was like to get—was savage pounding on the roof of the carriage. He felt like a handsomely trussed-up pea rolling around in the center of a drum. He'd meant to eat when he got back from Applethorpe's—

Something in his brain tried to warn his thoughts away, but there was no stopping the flood that broke through. The image struck in his stomach first, so that he thought he was going to spew—but then the pain rose and took over his breathing, knotting the muscles of his throat and face…He

would not come before Horn weeping. That at least he could withhold. He had been disarmed by his captors; but there were other ways to kill a man. He'd wrestled, and learned some of them. Never mind what St Vier had said; St Vier hadn't known how soon he would be facing his enemy. Or had he? Michael was amazed at Horn's effrontery: presumably the carriage had been left as a backup in case St Vier failed. Perhaps Horn meant to bed him before setting him up for another challenge…Erotic, violent visions wound through the labyrinth of pain and all the emotions he'd never had to feel before, the pain and grief and fury weaving themselves into a strangely seductively soothing trance. Rapt in it, he only noticed the carriage had stopped when he heard the squeak of the opening gate.

As it clattered into the yard he came fully alert. His breathing was quick, his awareness of his body seemed supernaturally heightened. The pain was there, but also the strength and coordination. When they opened the door he would be ready for them.

But they didn't open the door. The carriage pulled up to what he supposed was the house's main entrance. He could hear his captors getting down, the muffled growl of voices issuing orders. Then there was silence. They weren't going to leave him here all night, were they?

When the carriage door opened it heralded a light so bright that his eyes blinked and watered.

"Dear me," said a woman's voice out of the dazzling nimbus. "Was it necessary to be quite so thorough?"

"Well, your ladyship, he did try to kill me."

"All the same…Untie his feet, please, Grayson."

He didn't even look down at the man kneeling over his ankles. The Duchess Tremontaine stood framed by the little doorway, in full evening dress, holding up an inelegant iron lantern.

Finally, he was too bruised to care what she thought of him and his sense of style. "What are you doing here?" he asked hoarsely.

She smiled, her voice like long, cool slopes of snow. "This is my house. My people brought you here. Do you think you can stand up?"

He stood up, and sat down again swiftly.

"Well, I am not a nurse," she said with the same cool sweetness. "Grayson, will you see that Lord Michael is made comfortable indoors? My lord, I will attend you when you are rested."

Then the color, the sweetness, the perfume were gone, and he was left to the unpleasant task of imposing his will on his own unruly person.

SEVERAL AGES SEEMED TO PASS as Lord Michael worked his way up through strata of dirt, fatigue, hunger, and thirst. Diane's servants had put him in a handsome room with a hot bath and a set table. The room was lit by fire and candlelight. Curtains of heavy red velvet were drawn, so that he could not see which way the room faced. The red hangings, the mellow light, the sense of enclosure, all made him feel unreasonably safe and cared for, like a child wrapped up in a blanket in someone's arms.

The terrible pain of what had happened lay hard and bright at the center of his physical contentment. The memory came and went, like the ebb and flow of waves, but with no predictable pattern. When Michael was a little boy, there was a painting on the wall of his home that he was terrified of: it showed the spirit of a dead woman rising from the tomb, her baby in her arms. He had been afraid even to pass the room where it was. Whether he wanted to or not, he would think of it at the worst moments: in the dark, going up the stairs; so he started making himself think of it all the time, until it became so familiar that he could contemplate it without a tremor. He wasn't quite ready for that yet, not while the confusions and strangeness still enfolded him. Before he went bathing in the events of Applethorpe's death he had to know where the dry land was.

He was sunk in an easy chair before the fire; but at the click of the door latch he jumped like a cat. It was not the door he had come in by. This was a smaller one cut in the red wall.

Diane said, "Please, sit down. May I join you?"

Mutely he indicated a chair. She helped herself to some cherry cordial from the array of decanters, and seated herself across from him. She had changed her clothes: as if to prove that this was indeed her home, she wore a flowing housedress of soft blue silk. Her loose curls tumbled over her shoulders like the crests of waves.

"Please don't be too angry with Asper," she said. "You upset him rather badly the night of my little party. He is a vain man, and proud, and lecherous—you shouldn't find him so hard to understand."

For a moment he made the duchess fear for her personal possessions. But his fingers only left a dent in the pewter flagon at his side. She

continued, "You should have come to me, as soon as you suspected he was up to something." Michael still cared enough for her esteem not to want to tell her that he hadn't known. The duchess sighed. "Poor Asper! He isn't very subtle, and he isn't very clever. He was pestering some young woman of Tony's…By the way, Lord Michael, did you kill St Vier?"

"No. He killed my fighting-master."

"I see."

"I am not the swordsman you would have me, madam."

She smiled a bewitching, knowing smile. "Now, why should you say that?"

"I'll never stand a chance against him," he said bitterly, staring not at the beautiful woman, but into the dregs of the fire. "Everyone knew that. Applethorpe was humoring me." Another pain, a little sharp sliver that he'd borne since the challenge and almost forgotten in the weight of the other. "He knew I'd never make a swordsman."

"Once in a generation there comes a swordsman like St Vier. Your teacher never said you were that one." Sunk in his feelings, he did not respond. But her voice was no longer light. "But, for St Vier, there is nothing more. It is all he wants out of life, and probably all he'll ever get. That's not what you want; not all. It just comes closer than most things."

He looked at her, not really seeing her. He felt as though his skin had been peeled back with a scalpel. "What I want…"

"…I can give you," she said softly.

"*Fine—if I'm to be Horn!*"

He heard the harsh clang of metal, and realized that he was standing up, and that he had thrown the tankard across the room. The duchess hadn't stirred. "Madam," he said stiffly. "You chose to embroil yourself in my affairs. I hope it has given you pleasure. I believe all my desires ceased to be a matter for discussion between us some time ago."

She chuckled richly. He was appalled to find himself thinking of strawberries and cream. "There you are," she said. "I wonder if you men have any idea of how insulting it is to women when you assume that all we can offer is our bodies?"

"I am sorry." He looked up and met her eyes. "It is as insulting as to have it thought that's all we want."

"Don't apologize. I made you think it."

"You made me think a great many things this winter."

"Yes," she said. "Shall I apologize?"

"No."

"Good," she said. "Then I shall go on making you think. I know what you want. You want to be a man of power. I'm going to give you that."

His face unfroze; he was able to smile his charming smile. "Will it take long?"

"Yes," she said. "But it won't seem long."

"I want to be your lover," Michael said.

"Yes," said the duchess, and opened the red silk door to her chamber.

Inside it he paused. "Lord Ferris," he said.

"Ah, Ferris." Her voice was low; it made him shiver to hear it.

"Well; Ferris should have told me he knew Lord Horn was planning to kill you."

HE SEEMED TO FLOAT—as though he never touched her body, but was held suspended in some directionless space whose charts only she held. All pride, all fear were gone from him. Even the desire for it not to end was swallowed by the overwhelming present. His vaunted sophistication gave way to something new; and in that infinite space he rose and fell in the same moment into a world's end of fireworks reflected in a bottomless river.

MICHAEL."

The tip of her finger touched his ear, but all he did was sigh. "Michael, you're going to have to leave the city now. For two weeks, maybe three." He turned over and kissed her mouth, and felt a roaring in his ears. But her lips, while still soft, were not pliant, and he drew back to let her speak. "I would like to send you out of the country. There are some things I would like you to see. The people of Chartil respect a man who can use a sword, especially a nobleman. Will you go?"

His hands refused to leave her flesh, but he said over them, "I will."

"It must be now," she said. "The ship sails in three hours' time with the dawn tide."

It was a shock to him, but he mastered it, stroking her skin for the deliciousness of it, for the memory, without arousing the honeyed longing that would not let him go.

His clothes were set out in the red room. She followed him there, trailing silk and instructions. He should be tired, but his body tingled. It was the feeling he got after lessons—Like a club, the memory struck him hard. Bent over, strapping on his useless sword, he said nothing.

The duchess sat, smiling, swinging one white foot, watching him cover his collarbones. "I have something to give you," she said. He thought of roses, gloves, and handkerchiefs. "You will keep it for me, and no one can take it from you unless you offer it. I am convinced you will not offer it. It is a secret. My secret."

Fully dressed, he kissed her hand formally, the way he had that first afternoon at Lady Halliday's. "Ah," she said; "I was right about you then; and you were right about me. You see, it's true, Michael. Those men who died, Lynch and de Maris, they were not hired by the Duke of Karleigh. *I* hired Lynch—and de Maris got in the way. I needed to teach Karleigh a lesson, to tell him I was serious about a matter he thought I was joking about. He never took me seriously enough. Karleigh hired St Vier. His man won…but Karleigh—Karleigh knows he is going to lose in this matter, because I stand against him. If the duke is wise, he will stay in the country this spring."

That was all she was going to tell him, and then trust him to figure the rest out for himself. He didn't feel clever or triumphant, after all. Excited, maybe, and a little frightened.

The duchess reached up and touched his rough cheek. "Good-bye, Michael," she said. "If all goes well, you will come back soon."

There was a private side door, this time, for him to leave Tremontaine House by; and a chilly walk before the dawn, home to give his orders and depart. His sword hung at his side again, a heavy weight, but good protection in the dark.

chapter XVIII

WHEN THE DOOR OPENED Richard stayed where he was, sitting in the chair opposite. The cat had tolerated his steady stroking of her for almost an hour; but when his lap tensed she jumped off it, and darted over to the man coming in.

"Hello, Richard," said Alec. "What a surprise: you're awake, and it isn't even noon yet."

He looked terrible: clothes wrinkled, face unshaven; eyes within their dark circles a particularly malevolent shade of green. He stood in the middle of the room, refusing to sit down, trying hard not to sway. The door swung shut behind him.

Richard said, "Well, I went to bed early." If Alec didn't want to be touched, he wasn't going to force it. It was enough for him to see that Alec was on his feet, and whole. Alec's face was unmarked, and his tone as light as ever, though his voice was thick with sleeplessness.

Alec said, "I hear you bungled Horn's job."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Straight from the horse's…mouth. Godwin's not dead."

"I'm a swordsman, not an assassin. He didn't say to kill Godwin, he said to challenge him. I did. Someone else took the challenge; I killed *him*."

"Naturally."

"I don't see what you're fussing about it for; Horn must have been satisfied, or he wouldn't have—Alec!" Richard stared harder, trying to see beneath the shakily composed exterior. "Did you *escape?*"

But Alec only smiled scornfully. "Escape? Me? I couldn't escape from a haystack. I leave that kind of thing to you. No, he let me go when he found you'd fought the challenge. In the name of honor or something. You understand these people so much better than I do. I think"—Alec yawned

—"he didn't like me." He stretched his arms up over his head; high in the air the jewels flashed rainbows over his hands.

Richard's breath caught with a tearing sound.

"Oh." Alec pulled his cuffs back into place. "I'm afraid I've lost one of your rings. The rose. His so-called swordsmen took it. Maybe you can bill him for it. God, these clothes stink! I haven't changed them for three days. I'm going to roll them into a ball and drop them out of the window for Marie. Then I'm going to bed. I kept trying to sleep in the carriage, but it didn't have any springs, and then every time I was about to drop off I thought I smelt civet. I spent most of the trip with my head out of the window. And then they made me *walk* from the bridge! The near bridge, not the far one, at least, but even so…"

Everyone in Riverside knew what shackle marks looked like. Richard followed him to bed, and later on he tried to kiss them. But Alec wrenched his wrists away.

"What else did he do?" Richard demanded harshly.

"Nothing! What more do you want?"

"Did he—"

"He didn't do *anything*, Richard, just leave me alone!"

But late that night, when Alec was drunk and excited and no longer cared, Richard kissed the marks again, and thought of Lord Horn.

THE SWORDSMAN'S BUSINESS KEPT HIM OUT LATE the next day. When he came back he expected to find Alec asleep: Alec had been out of bed that morning at dawn, despite his late ordeal. But to his surprise a fire was blazing in the hearth, and Alec was kneeling in front of it. His loose hair, unbraided and unclasped, curtained his face like a temple mystery. With his black robe and long limbs he looked like a child's image of a wizard, peering into the mysteries of the fire. But he was busy doing something: with a shock Richard realized that Alec was tearing pages out of a book, carefully and methodically feeding them to the flames. He did not look up when St Vier shut the door, or when he took a few steps into the room.

Afraid to startle him, Richard said, "Alec. I'm back."

"Are you?" said Alec dreamily. The page he was holding burst into flame; his eyes were fixed on the blaze. His face was lit to flatness like an idol's mask, his eyes two dark slits. "Did you have a nice time?"

"It was all right. What are you burning?"

Alec turned the book's spine around, as though he needed to be reminded of the title. "*On the Causes of Nature*," he said. "I don't need it any more."

It had been his gift; but Richard didn't give gifts to hold on to them. He stretched out before the fire, glad to be home. "I thought it would take you longer to memorize this one. You haven't even worn the words off the binding yet."

"I don't need it any more," Alec repeated. "I know everything now."

Something in the careful way Alec was taking hold of each page should have alerted him already. St Vier sprang out of his chair and spun Alec around by the shoulder.

"Stop that," Alec said with mild annoyance. "You're hurting me." He didn't resist the fingers prying wide his eyelids. He looked calmly at Richard with eyes that were like two matched emeralds, with only a speck of black to mar each one.

"God!" Richard's grip tightened. "You're sotted on Delight!"

The figured lips curved. "Of course. Am I supposed to be surprised? It's excellent stuff, Richard; you should have some."

St Vier recoiled involuntarily, although his grip held. "No, I shouldn't. I hate what the stuff does. It makes you stupid, and clumsy."

"You're just being stuffy. I have some right here—"

"No. Alec, how—when did you start doing this?"

"At University." The drug intensified the languor of his aristocratic drawl. "Harry and I, doing experiments. Taking notes. You could take notes for me."

"I can't," Richard said.

"No, it's easy. Just write down what I say…We're going to do a book. It will influence generations to come."

Richard held tight to his shoulder. "Tell me where you got it. How much did you take?"

Alec waved his hand vaguely. "Why, would you like some?"

"No, I would not like some. How often do you do this?" It was stupid of him never to have considered it before. He'd thought he knew Alec, knew his habits and his ways, even when he wasn't there…

Alec looked at him complacently. “Not often. Not for a long time. I’m occupied with…other things. You look so worried, Richard. I saved you some.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Richard said dryly. “We’ll just have to wait it out, then. With other things.” He carefully placed his arm around his lover’s neck, tasted the sweetness of the drug on his tongue. With his other hand he slipped the book from Alec’s fingers, laying it down away from the hearth. Then he led him into the bedroom.

He wasn’t much good to talk to, but his body was pliant and sensitive as Richard undressed him.

“Why are you doing that?” Alec asked, more than once, as Richard undid another button, another lace.

“So you won’t be cold,” Richard answered; and later, “So I can kiss it. There. Like that.”

Alec chuckled happily. “I appreciate that. I appreciate you.”

“Thanks.” Richard tickled him gently. “I appreciate you…”

Then Alec stiffened and drew back. “What’s that?” he cried.

“Probably me. My heartbeat. Nothing, don’t worry…”

“They’re watching me, Richard, they’re watching me!”

The period of serenity had passed, and the nervousness Richard had hoped to circumvent was upon him. “No one’s watching.”

But Alec pulled out of his arms and spread himself before the window, his clothes half off him, hanging by ribbons and half-sleeves. He was pressing his palms to the glass, trying to cover it with his spread fingers, while his eyes fixed on the sky above them.

“The stars are watching me,” he declared in a voice of terrible pain. “Make them stop!”

“They’re not watching. Why should they?”

“God, make them stop. They’re watching me!”

Richard interposed himself between Alec and the window, and pulled the shutters closed. “It’s all right now. They can’t see you.”

Alec clung to him, burying his face in Richard’s shoulder. “I tried to get away…Stone and Griffin and I, we were so sure…we had the calculations, Richard, they were right, I know they were…it didn’t matter about me, but they needed that stupid degree…what’s going to happen to Harry’s sister?” he cried wildly.

"It's all right…"

"No, you don't understand—the chancellors tore it up! I wouldn't believe them, I didn't think they'd do that…"

"The University chancellors?"

"Doctor Pig-Nose."

"And that's why they kicked you out?" He'd always suspected something like this.

"No. Not me. I'm all right. It's *you* I'm worried for…"

"Not me, Alec."

"…Richard? You have to protect me. I was safe in Rhetoric—do you know what that is?—in History, Geometry, but consider the angle of the sun: the stars describe an arc without a tangent—but they're watching, all the time they're watching me—"

He started violently at the sound of knocking in the hall. Richard held him tighter. Was he trying to destroy himself for that, because the University had rejected his work? He must have put a lot of faith in the place to begin with. If it had been his escape from his nobility, it was understandable. And if he was not noble, the school must have been his last chance…

"You're all right now," Richard repeated mechanically. "That's all over. No one can hurt you now."

"Don't let them find me. You don't know what it's like, knowing they won't touch you, just your friends, and everybody thinking I'm some kind of spy for the nobles—all I wanted was to—"

The knocking was fierce, and it was at their door. A thought came to Richard, and he tucked Alec in the blankets. "Alec," he said carefully, "stay here, don't move. It's all right, there's just someone at the door. I'll be back soon."

He waited until he'd left the bedroom to take up his sword.

Richard flung the door back in one sharp motion, blade already poised. It was a woman standing there, in a velvet cloak.

"Well," said Ginnie Vandall, observing the sword, "you're a little on edge."

"Just being careful."

"You should be. Are you alone?"

"In fact, I'm not. Can it wait 'til morning?"

She took the lowered blade as an invitation to enter, sweeping past him into the middle of the room. "That's up to you, my dear. I'll make it short."

"It can wait, then."

"Look," she said; "I haven't come here alone at this hour to get turned away because you didn't want to put your clothes back on."

He put the sword down. "All right. What is it?"

"It's two men found dead at the bottom of Ganser Steps not an hour ago. The Watch found them, and the stupid bastards can't figure out why they were killed expertly with a sword. Neither can I. It was that neat upper stroke through the heart, and sooner or later someone's going to point out that you're the only one who can do that more than once."

"They're supposed to."

She stared at him angrily. "Those men weren't Riverside. You're not a nobleman, you can't run around the city picking off whoever you want without a contract and expect no one to care. If you're going to commit your little murders, be careful how close to the Bridge you leave the corpses. We don't want the Watch coming in here looking for trouble."

"They won't. And I had to make sure there was no mistake. Are you pretending, or don't you know who those men were?"

Her stare lost some of its hardness. "Oh, Richard," she sighed. "I was hoping you weren't going to say that."

"It's all right," he said. "The lord who set them after Alec isn't going to come forward and demand justice for them. He isn't the type. I really don't see what you're worried about. No one's going to harrow Riverside over a couple of bravos. And I've just made sure that that kind of thing doesn't happen again. Hugo should be glad." He went to the door and held it open for her. "Good night, Ginnie."

"Wait," she said, her hand raised to her throat. "It doesn't have anything to do with Riverside, or with Hugo or any of the others. You've got to be more careful. They can't *let* you go around like that, not outside this district." The hand lowered from her throat, glided down over the velvet. "If it comes to an Inquiry, my dear, you'll hang, no matter what this lord's done to you."

"Thank you. Good night."

She moved closer, not to the door but to him, looking into his face. The shadows picked out the lines etched by her mouth and the corners of her

eyes. “I know what I’m doing,” she said, her voice as hard as her face. “I’ve taken care of Hugo, and Hal Lynch, and Tom Cook before him. You don’t want to die rich, that’s fine with me. You want to take up with people who hate you, that’s fine too. Just don’t ignore what I say.”

“I understand,” he said to get rid of her. She wasn’t a nervous talker; she had kept her eyes on him, and hadn’t noticed the ruined book on the floor, or the mess in the fireplace.

“Richard,” said Ginnie, “you don’t.”

Her arms lifted slowly, and he let her fingers twine through his hair, pressing the back of his skull until his lips were bent to hers.

Richard had never actually kissed Ginnie Vandall before. Even in the heat of her moment she was expert and careful. The softness of her lips and the sharpness of her teeth fluttered down to the base of his spine. He shifted closer to her, catching the heat of her hipbone jutting into his thigh, her breasts flattening against his chest. He pressed his palm into the small of her back, parting his lips to reach her, when she pulled violently away.

The recoil jolted him backwards. He stared at her, still breathing deeply. Ginnie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Fool’s Delight,” she said in disgust. “That’s something new for you. Is that what it takes these days?”

He shook his head. “I don’t do that.”

She glanced toward the back room, but didn’t say Alec’s name. Ginnie pulled her cloak around her and shrugged. “Good luck.”

He stood for a moment listening to her feet going down the stairs. He heard the sound of another woman’s voice: Marie, who must have let her in.

Then a floorboard creaked close behind him. Alec had drifted into the room, unnaturally soft-footed. His shirt still hung loose around his waist.

“I thought I heard something,” he explained. He seemed to have forgotten about the stars.

“Someone came to see me,” Richard said; but Alec wasn’t listening. He stalked the leather-bound book where it lay, just within range of the fire’s dying glow, its gold tooling coursing with reflected light.

Alec crouched down. His clever fingers lifted the book from the floor, smoothing the crumpled pages, stroking the grime from its cover. He put

the decorated leather to his cheek. The book rested against his face like a beautiful ornament, his eyes large and dark above it. His bare collarbones and shoulders framed its bottom edge.

"You see," he said, "you mustn't give me things."

"Stop it," Richard said, frightened and angry. The pale face looked otherworldly, but he knew it was just the drugs.

"Richard." Alec stared at him without blinking. "Don't tell me what to do. No one tells me what to do." He turned to the fire with the book in his left hand held out behind him like a balance. Alec stretched his right hand toward the embers glowing red in the hearth. It was like watching a magic trick that might succeed…Before his hand could close over the hot coals Richard sprang, pulling him roughly back into his arms, half-sprawling on the floor.

"Ah," Alec sighed, going limp with dead weight on him. "You're such a coward."

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you," Richard said doggedly, as though he were losing an argument.

"It isn't worth it," said Alec dreamily; "you won't always be there. They've got it all worked out now, haven't they? What do you suppose they'll want from you next?"

So he'd figured it out. For once, it had cost Richard something to protect him. But drugs couldn't keep that away forever.

"Don't worry," said Richard. "I'm taking care of that. It won't happen again."

It was hard not to be angry with Ginnie's meddling. Richard owed her too much from the past to lose his temper with her because this once she was wrong. Even Alec knew that she was wrong. The men who had done Lord Horn's work must be found dead at the hands of St Vier.

chapter XIX

IT WAS TOO EARLY IN THE YEAR for an outdoor party, but one didn't refuse an invitation from the Duchess Tremontaine. Actually, the whole thing was impromptu and very delightful, as the ladies assured each other, bending over their flamingo mallets to give their wooden urchins a dainty tap: the weather unseasonably warm, the food fresh, the company delightful. Trust Diane to be so whimsically original! The gentlemen, their escorts, were quietly bored. One could flirt, but one couldn't bet—not on other people's wives and sisters, it wasn't decent.

Lord Ferris wondered whether his mistress kept inviting Horn because she thought it would amuse him. Usually it did; but this week he was not eager to be entertained by Horn. His equable settling of the weavers' rebellion had returned Ferris to the city a hero to his peers, and it was important that he circulate amongst them now, visible and accepting praise. The little man and his troubles were of no consequence now. But Horn kept edging up to Ferris, knocking his ball over to where he was standing, even when it was patently obvious that it was doing his game no good.

Diane was, as always, careful not to show any interest in Ferris, although it was the first time she'd seen her lover in weeks. Ferris, too, was careful. He remembered the first time he had been long out of town, near the beginning of their association. On his return he had gone straight to her house, to report to her on his mission, and to peel the silks from her body, inflamed with the memory of her. But he was more experienced now, and more cautious. He had not wanted to provoke comment by coming to see her immediately. He had a dinner engagement later tonight; but perhaps after her party there might be time for them to go to bed.

The glitter of sunlight on water, the merry music, the sparkling laughter and radiant colors of spring wardrobes set free from the confines of winter were giving Lord Ferris a headache. Horn's blue suit was a prime offender. Here it came again. Enthusiastically Ferris turned his back on the approaching nobleman to immerse himself in the nearest pool of gossip.

"We seem to be losing people at a stupendous pace this winter," a sharp-faced noble called Galeno was expounding to a knot of men. "At this rate the town will be empty before the season's officially ended, and there'll be no one left at all to vote in Spring Council."

"Oh?" said Lord Ferris, ignoring Horn's peripheral gesticulations. "Who's missing now?"

"First the Filisands left before New Year because of illness," Galeno elaborated comprehensively, not to be balked of his list; "then Raymond had that falling out with his wife's father; then there was the business with Karleigh and the swords; and now young Godwin's house is shut up, with no word of explanation. No one's seen him for days."

That explained Horn's perturbation. "I hope nothing's happened to him," Ferris said politely.

"Oh, no; the servants said they'd received his personal orders to close up. But no one knows where he's gone, not even young Berowne, who usually can be counted on."

Something must have gone wrong. Too bad for Asper. But Lord Michael had clearly left town, maybe even left the country, and that suited Ferris's purposes. Suddenly he thought, What if Godwin hadn't left at all, what if Diane was hiding him here in her house? But he dismissed the idea as abruptly as it had come. She wouldn't like the bother, or the risk. Her interest in the young man couldn't extend that far already. Godwin had been warned off, and that was all that was necessary.

"Karleigh," said someone with insight. "You didn't see him, Lord Ferris, when you went south? His hospitality's always good, and he must be bored to death out there. Glad of a little company, even from the opposition."

"No, I didn't see him." Let them believe that or not, as they liked. The truth was that he had not gone. He saw no need to let Karleigh feel important, and he'd been in a hurry to get back and settle with St Vier. He would tell Lord Halliday that Karleigh had seemed docile. It didn't much matter what he told Halliday now. "Karleigh's old news," Lord Ferris told

his peers; "midwinter madness. No one with any sense will want to unseat the Crescent next month."

"But the rule—"

"We'll call an emergency and vote it down. There's always an emergency somewhere." Appreciative laughter in reference to the weavers.

"Oh," said old Tielman crustily. "So that's the plan, is it? A sudden emergency that never quite lets up?"

The temperature around the little group dropped suddenly. Tielman was of Karleigh's generation; had been raised, perhaps, on the same stories of evil kings and the sovereign rights of the nobility. Ferris felt attention on him, like a single ray of heat. All across the lawn heads were turning to the knot of men, although no one knew exactly what they were looking for. Ferris had no desire to get himself into a challenge in Halliday's defense; at the same time, it would not hurt for the Crescent's supporters to see him as a benevolent force.

"My lord," he fixed his good eye on the old man. "Your words do no one credit."

The Dragon Chancellor had weight and power. He had presence. Tielman backed off. "I pray," he said with dignity, "that my lord will not take offense. But we do not speak of a joking matter."

"Then indeed you must!" a woman's voice chimed. It was the duchess, who, attentive as always to the mood of her company, had attached herself to the fringes of the circle. Now she took Ferris's arm. The wind fluttered the green and silver ribbons that streamed from her hat and dress. "I smell a political discussion: no jokes allowed! But at my party we will be merry, and tell jokes that everyone can laugh at. Such a lovely day, on loan from summer. I don't know why you gentlemen must always be looking out for a chance to quarrel." Her voice rippled on over the last of the dissolving tension. "And if you must quarrel, let it be over women, or something else worthwhile…"

Still talking, she led Ferris across the grass. Those nearest saw her lean her head into him, and caught snatches of her chiding, "Really, my lord, you are just like all the rest of them…"

Not lowering her voice, she said, "Now come, sit where I can keep an eye on you and you won't get into mischief, and tell me all about your trip. I don't suppose you were able to pick up some wool at a reasonable price…?"

He allowed himself to be led to a wide seat under a linden tree. With the spread of her skirts and flounces there was barely room for him to sit down beside her; but he expertly flipped back the hang of his sleeves and poised himself on the edge of the seat.

He was, unfortunately, a sitting target for Lord Horn. To desert one's hostess would be rude; so when the fair nobleman came strolling up to them Ferris determined to stick it out with reinforcement from Diane.

To his dismay, the duchess showed no inclination to assist him in his evasion. "Asper! How splendid you look. You should always wear blue, it is your best color; don't you think so, Tony?"

"Unquestionably." His head was beginning to ache again. "Although I find green always gives him a certain…wicked air."

"Indeed?" Horn preened. "And is wickedness something to be cultivated, my lord?"

Oh, god, Ferris groaned inwardly. Desperate, he let his eye stray to the flamingo game. "Madam Duchess! You have no champion. Allow me to take up your cause."

She turned her mouth down mockingly. "Flamingo, my lord? Isn't that a bit tame for you?"

He shrugged. "It's the game of choice. Anyway, I play a poisonous game. I learnt it from my sisters. Even with one eye, I'll bet I can see your ball through to the stake ahead of those field mice."

"How ungallant—for the field mice. I, of course, am flattered. But I'm afraid you can't have my ball, Tony, it's cracked. You'll have to champion someone else."

"Never mind the flamingo," Horn said affably; "come and walk with me, my dear."

"Oh, yes, Tony! You can show Asper the sculpture garden—I don't believe he's seen my additions to my lord the late duke's collection, although I know he saw the originals when dear Charles was alive. Of course I can't leave everyone now, so it will have to be you. I hope you don't mind…"

Defeated and fuming, he bowed. "It will give me the greatest pleasure."

Lord Ferris maintained a frosty silence as he led the other noble across the lawns toward the statuary garden.

"What a wonderful woman," said Horn, complacent now that he'd achieved his desire. Lord Ferris did not answer him, and the two men stepped onto the gravel path bordered by privet. The bushes were just beginning to come into leaf, creating a green-grey screen between them and the party across the lawn.

The first of the sculptures jutted a toe into their line of vision. It belonged to a nymph, innocently bathing her foot in a presumed stream that ran at about the level of their noses. On the pedestal behind her a leering satyr lurked, preparing to pounce, balked of his desire by an eternity of marble.

They passed it without comment. Horn's light satin shoes crunched rhythmically on the gravel path, leading deeper into the maze. The smell of sap and damp earth drifted past the barriers of their perfume. Under the next statue Horn paused. It was a classic piece depicting a now-defunct god in his avatar as a ram begetting a future hero on a virgin priestess who, according to this particular sculptor, was enraptured with her good fortune. For a moment Horn looked vaguely at it, and then took his carved ivory wand and began tapping the crucial juncture absently, with the nervous rhythm of someone drumming his fingernails.

"It didn't work," he said at last.

"Obviously," said Ferris, at no pains to hide his boredom.

"That little bastard Godwin's run off somewhere. God knows what he told St Vier first. I'll be a laughingstock!"

"You'd better ask the swordsman. Pay him something extra."

Horn swore. "How the devil am I to ask him anything? Getting this job out of him was bad enough."

"Well, you've still got his friend, haven't you? Just send him—"

Horn's pale eyes protruded further. "Of course not! I sent the fellow back! It was in the agreement. I couldn't go back on my word. Anyhow, he was a damned bother."

Ferris lowered his hands and walked away.

When Horn caught up with him he stopped. "You realize," Ferris said, "that now St Vier is going to try to kill you?"

Horn lifted his chin, an arrogant and somehow tantalizing gesture left over from his days of beauty. "He wouldn't dare. Not on his own. Not without a contract."

"St Vier doesn't work on contract. You should know that."

"But I sent the fellow back!"

"Well, get him again."

"I can't. The men I used—they're dead. Two days ago. My agent told me this morning."

Ferris laughed. Birdlike, his one eye glinted at Horn. "Can you imagine who killed them? Poor clever St Vier; I'm sure he was hoping you'd have figured it out by now. He doesn't know you; or his faith in humanity is high."

Lord Horn's face had turned the color of old cheese. His age showed on it suddenly, lined and hollowed. "Your woman—Katherine—tell her to call him off!"

"I won't have you bothering Katherine; you've been too much with her already."

"I can't leave the city—there'd be talk—"

"Stay, then, and guard yourself."

"He wouldn't dare," Horn hissed. "If he touches me, he'll hang!"

"Yes, if he's caught," Ferris said, and added reasonably, "He's a madman, Asper; all great swordsmen are. It's the devil of a job. But they have their rules, just as we have ours. If you hadn't chosen to act outside them, you wouldn't be having these problems."

He turned to go, eager to rejoin the party; but Horn caught the end of his sleeve, and he was forced to stop lest the fabric be torn.

"You!" Horn spat. "Dragon Chancellor! You're a fine one to talk of rules. Shall I tell them how you encouraged this? You knew all about it from that girl of yours—you sent her to meet me, she told me you wouldn't mind…"

"If by them you mean the Council…" Ferris tried to repress a slight smile. "All right, I was careless." He had been nothing of the kind. Horn knew only as much as was good for him. But it wouldn't do to have Horn completely against him, in case he got out of this alive. He began to play him out, the cat's paw. "But Asper, I beg you to reconsider. To denounce me before them means exposing your own part in this. I would not have you ruin my career at the expense of your own reputation."

Horn's face was still belligerent, but faintly puzzled. He'd missed the irony, but some of the logic was getting through to him. "There's no crime in setting a swordsman on some young puppy…"

"But they'll want to know why," Ferris said gently. "As you say, there'll be talk. And it *is* a crime to abduct someone, although of course when you've explained your reasons…"

Horn swallowed convulsively, the carefully hidden webbing of his throat moving against the cloth. "I can't…"

"No, of course not," the orator's voice soothed. A sudden provocative image of the duchess touched Ferris's mind. He never wanted to go to bed with men, although many people said the excitement and sense of mastery were greater. Ferris liked women, and intelligent ones. For men, he liked the exercise of maneuvering them, not just stupid ones like Horn, but clever ones like Halliday, feeling them hurtle down the slope with him on a sled of his own devising, turning the corners at his chosen rate of speed…it was a pleasure as dense and complex as lovemaking, with effects far more lasting and rewarding.

"Go on," he said kindly to the now humble nobleman. "Increase your guard, get a couple of swordsmen…"

Horn passed a hand over his face. "You don't suppose he would swear out a complaint against me…?" It would be humiliating, but safer.

"And let people know what you did to him? No, I don't think so, Asper. He wants you to sweat; that's why he killed your other men first. I suppose the best thing you can do is to be as carefree as possible. Maybe find someone to challenge him first. It's a bit irregular, but better than being set on yourself some night, don't you think?" They came to another statue, of the ram god enjoying the eternal gratitude of his armorer. "Ah," said Ferris with ruthless good humor; "now this is new. It's by the same sculptor as the nymph; the duke commissioned it just before his death, so of course it's taken the fellow years to deliver…"

But Horn barely had a glance to spare for it. Nervously twisting the ivory wand in his palm, he seemed to be looking about the garden for a means of escape; or perhaps he saw swordsmen lurking in the shrubbery.

Ferris released him, saying, "Go on. Make a few inquiries. Perhaps he's just trying to scare you."

"He killed de Maris…"

"And Lynch. You'd better get three. Good thing you can afford it. Good luck, my dear!"

When Horn had vanished down the path Ferris swore, and kicked the statue's base. He felt silly immediately, but better. Did Diane know about this? St Vier was about to become a difficult man to do business with. If the swordsman was to kill Halliday, he must do it before he murdered Horn and became a wanted man. To his regret, Ferris decided it would be best to leave the party at once, to return home and begin setting things in motion.

chapter XX

"I HEAR," ALEC SAID, "that you've been conducting a few small murders."

It was two days since his bout with Delight. Neither he nor Richard had spoken of it since. Today was an unusually warm spring afternoon. On the Hill, the Duchess Tremontaine was giving a garden party.

Richard said, "A few."

"Those two were rotten fighters, even I could see that. Everyone's very excited about it."

"They should be."

"You're a hero. Small children will press bunches of flowers into your hands as you pass by. Old women will fling themselves weeping into your arms. Don't stand too still; pigeons will think you're a commemorative statue and crap on you."

"Ginnie thinks I'm buying trouble."

Alec shrugged. "She just doesn't want you to have a good time. She doesn't understand the fighting spirit. When there's no one left to kill in Riverside, you have to expand."

Richard wanted to touch the hard edges of his lips. But outside of bed, they didn't do that. The swordsman said, "There's always someone to kill in Riverside. That reminds me: I'm going out tonight, as soon as it gets dark."

"Again? Are you going to kill someone?"

"I'm going to the city."

"Not to see Ferris—" Alec demanded.

"No; I still haven't heard from him. Don't worry about that. You'll read me the letter when it comes."

"Who read you the last one, the one from our friend?"

"Ginnie did."

Alec hissed.

"You can go where you like, now," Richard said; "no one's going to give you any trouble. Where will I find you tonight?"

"That depends on how long you're out. Home; Rosalie's; maybe Martha's if there's a game going there…"

"I'll try home first. Don't wait up for me; I'll wake you when I come in."

THE WOMAN TWISTED IN THE NOBLEMAN'S GRASP, making him hurt her with his refusal to let go of her arms. Her hair was in his mouth, and across her eyes; but there was a purpose to her twisting, as he found when her heel hit the back of his knee and he stumbled against the bed.

"Y' little street-fighter!" Lord Ferris grunted, hauling her in half by her hair. "Y've nothing to fear down there!"

"You promised!" she cried, a vanquished wail despite the ferocity of her fighting. "You said I'd never have to go down there again!"

He turned her, so that her naked breasts were crushed against his throat. "Don't be a fool, Katherine. What's the harm in it? I'll buy you a lovely dress, I'm sorry for this one…" The top of it straggled in pieces over her thighs. "Just this once…"

She was crying. "Why can't you send a note?"

"You know why. I need someone I can trust, to find him tonight." He eased her onto his lap, nuzzling her throat. "Little whore," he said fondly; "I'll send you down to the kitchens again…I'll have you turned out for stealing…"

"I never—"

"Shh!" Gently, Lord Ferris kissed his mistress. "I don't want your temper now, Kathy. Just do as you're told…"

IN THE DARKEST CORNER OF Rosalie's she waited, a shawl covering her head, a dagger naked on the table in front of her to discourage conversation. She had slipped past Marie, but there was no one at home in St Vier's rooms. On the stairs, her heart had thundered like a drum in a too-small space, in the terrible closeness of the limitless dark. She'd listened outside the door, trying to silence her body's noisy breath and pulse of panic. Riverside was a sector of ghosts for her now; everywhere she looked she saw the past. If she opened his door there might be dawn light and a dead woman on the floor, with Richard St Vier looking at her in perplexity saying, "She was screaming at me."

But no one answered her knock. With relief she gave up and went to the tavern, remembering how to hide in a crowd. She didn't want to draw attention to herself by asking if Richard had been there. There were people who would recognize her if she spoke, or if she uncovered her hair. Rosalie's had the same wet smell as ever; it was one of her earliest memories, her mother taking her down there, giving her to some old woman to hold who'd give her a bite of cake if she was good and sometimes braid her hair to make it pretty, while her mother talked with her friends and argued with dealers.

She'd met Richard there, when he was not much more than a new boy come from the country who'd found his way to Riverside because he'd heard the rents were cheap. She'd liked him because of the way he laughed, softly and privately, even then. She watched him fight his early duels, become a fad on the Hill, and finally take up with Jessamyn, a woman who had always scared her a little. But the three of them had sat at one of these tables, laughing together one night until their eyes ran; now she couldn't even remember what it had been about.

She heard echoing laughter across the tavern and lifted her head. The crowded knot of interest looked almost like a fight, but only one man seemed angry; everyone else was laughing. A tall man in black blocked her view. A couple of women were high-talking the tall man, flirting, teasing; and the angry man was turning away from the group in disgust, trying to ignore their mockery. Katherine realized who the tall one must be.

"Alec," she said when she got close enough for him to hear her. He turned sharply; she guessed people didn't use his name much. "I'll buy you a drink," she said.

He asked, "Do you gamble? Max has given up on me—I can think faster than he can cheat."

She drew her breath in softly. She knew the voice. She couldn't place it, but somewhere on the Hill she'd heard it before. She couldn't picture him well dressed, though, hair cut and ruffles ironed. And with his height she'd remember having met him. Still, she knew it, somehow: lazy, cool, and self-assured. Richard said he had tried to kill himself. He must be crazy. He couldn't be stupid: Richard wouldn't like that.

"I'll dice," she said, "if you want."

They had to wait for a table to come free again. "Who sent you?" Alec asked.

"What do you mean, who sent me?"

"Oh," he said after a moment. "You want Richard. Have you got a bribe?"

"I don't need one. He's already doing business with us."

"Oh." He looked her up and down. "I hope you're armed. It's nasty down here."

"I know."

It went beyond aristocracy, his arrogance. Now she wasn't sure she had heard him before. She didn't remember anyone who spoke without care for effect, without courtesy or irony, as though his words were dropping into darkness and it didn't matter who heard them. No wonder Richard wanted him. He wasn't safe.

They found a seat against the wall.

"Are you the one who gave him the ruby?" Alec asked.

"Yes, the ring."

He put his hand flat on the table. The token glittered there on his finger. "Can you accept for him," she asked tartly, "or does he just like to decorate you?"

"Very good," said Alec with lazy amusement. "He just likes to decorate me. Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is Katherine Blount. I work on the Hill."

"For Lord Ferris?"

Nervously she looked around for listeners, then bypassed the question. "If Richard accepts the job, I can give him the money."

"Where is it, sewn into your petticoats?" he inquired politely. "Interesting to watch him get it out."

Despite her annoyance, she laughed. "Tell me where I can find him, and I'll let you watch."

A look of distaste crossed his face. No wonder the whores liked to tease him. It was a striking face, too bony for handsomeness, but beautiful in its way, sharp and fine as the quills of a feather.

He fished in his purse, picking out a few coins of silver that he shifted from hand to hand. "Do you know Tremontaine?" he asked.

He wanted to bribe her for information. She kept her face straight. She wasn't going to refuse the money; not straight off, anyway. "The duchess, you mean?"

"Tremontaine."

"She's a lady."

"God, you *can't* be that stupid!" he said irritatedly.

He had the money; she kept her temper in check. It wasn't his fault he didn't know what he was doing. She imagined Richard liked him that way. "What do you want to know?"

"What does Tremontaine have to do with all this?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't say."

"She didn't give you the ring?"

"No, sir."

He didn't even notice the sudden servility. "Then who did?"

"My master, sir."

He let one coin fall to the table. "Where the hell did *he* get it?"

"I didn't ask," she said tartly, dropping the demureness. "If it's hers, then she gave it to him."

Another coin fell. "Is that likely?"

"Very likely."

He spilled the rest of the coins in front of her, and pressed a fist into his palm; but not before she saw how his hands were shaking. His voice, though, was careless: "Now give me a chance to win them back from you."

"Unless I cheat faster than you can think? You don't know how to cheat, do you, Alec?"

"I don't need to."

"Where can I find Richard?"

"Nowhere. You can't. He doesn't want the job."

"Why don't you want him to take it?"

He looked down at her. "Whatever makes you think I have anything to say about it?"

There it was again, the evasion cloaked in rudeness. She put her chin in her hands, and looked into his haughty, stubborn face. "Your know, he's told me about you," she said, putting into her voice all she knew of them both. "He's not going to kill you, don't pin your hopes on that. He tried it once before, and he didn't like it."

"That's odd," he mused; "he didn't tell me about *you*. I expect he thought I wouldn't be interested."

She stood up. "Tell him I was here," she rapped out, the flat rapid patter of Riverside back in her voice. "Tell him I need to see him."

"Oh?" he said. "Is it a personal matter, then? Or is it just that your master will beat you?"

He would say anything to get a reaction, she told herself; all the same, she found herself leaning over him, saying into his face, "You don't belong here. Richard knows that. You can't keep this up forever."

"You belong here," he answered coolly, real pleasure in his voice because at last he had pierced her. "Stay with us. Don't go back to the Hill. They don't let you have any fun there."

She looked at him, and saw in the disdainful face just how badly he wanted to be attacked. And she straightened up, picked up her cloak. "I'll be at the Old Bell tomorrow night with the advance money. Tell him."

Alec sat where he was, watching her leave. Then, since he'd given her all the money he had, he went home.

SHE THOUGHT ABOUT CHECKING a couple of other haunts. The streets were so terribly dark outside the circle of torchlight that marked the tavern's door. She'd grown unused to not being able to see at night, not knowing what her hand would next encounter, what her feet would find beneath them, what sounds would come lurching out of the hollow silence. Her own fear made her afraid. People could tell from how you walked how well you could handle it. Here there was no attempt made to light the entries of

houses, no Watch treading the mud and cobbles on their regular route. She stood outside Rosalie's in the circle of torchlight. Richard could be anywhere. She wasn't going to search all of Riverside for him, she'd done what she could. For all she knew, he could be on the Hill. She'd delivered her message to his usual place, and that was that.

A child came by, carrying a bundle of torches. Only children and cripples were torchbearers here; no strong man wanted to earn his money guarding those who couldn't take care of themselves.

"Lightcha, lady?"

"Yes. To the Bridge."

"That's extra, to cross it."

"I know that. Hurry up," she said, and drew her cloak around her like a blanket.

chapter XXI

IT WAS RICHARD'S SECOND NIGHT of watching Horn's house, and already it was paying off. The guards seemed to be concentrated at the front: apparently Horn was expecting a formal challenge, and wanted to be sure of not meeting it himself.

Richard was standing outside the back garden wall, among the leafless branches of an old lilac bush. He would never understand why these people left such good camouflage so near the entrances to their houses, when the whole purpose of walls was to keep people out. Braced halfway up it, between the bush and wall, he'd been able to see all he needed to of the

back of the house. When he heard the approach of the guard who occasionally patrolled the back garden, he'd dropped back to the ground. Now he listened to the receding footsteps rounding the far corner of the house. He waited in the darkness listening, for one minute, two, timing by his own breathing to make sure that excitement didn't betray him into moving too soon. A carriage clattered by in the street, the torches of its outriders throwing a streak of shadow against the wall, himself entangled in the lilac branches.

The back of the house was silent. He knew Horn was at home this night, and alone, without visitors. He even had a fair idea now of where to find him: the pattern of lights passing behind the windows had indicated hallways and occupied rooms. Richard took off his heavy cloak, which was fine for waiting out of doors but no good for climbing trees; he wrapped it around the light dueling sword he carried—his pride, a new blade of folded steel, light as a kiss and sharp as a surgeon's tool—and tucked the bundle under his arm. With the help of the bush, climbing the outside wall was no great feat. He remembered the drop on the other side as not too far, and made it. Without the snow, the garden looked a little different; but he had in his head the map the Duke of Karleigh had provided of the formal gardens the night he fought Lynch and de Maris here.

Richard stood still, accustoming his feet to the new ground. The air was very chill; without his cloak he felt it, even through the layers of clothing he wore. He heard the Watch pass on the other side of the wall, making their usual racket. He felt his cold lips curve in a smile. There was almost an acre of ground between him and the house, heavily decorated with topiary. By the faint and steady light of stars he picked his way among the carved bushes, stopping to shelter under a yew shaped like a castle, skirting the outside of the boxwood maze whose paths could be glimpsed through gaps in the hedge.

At last the house loomed above him; just another wall to climb to reach the first-story window he had targeted: a tall window, with a convenient wrought-iron balcony that should hold a man's weight. An immense rose trellis climbed up to it. Very pretty, no doubt, in summer.

He buckled the sword on close to his body, and pinned his cloak at his neck, knotting it into a heavy ball behind him. The rustling of dry branches, the scrape of his toe against stone, sounded loud in his ears; but

his world was shrunk to a tiny point where the least sound and movement were mammoth.

The climb warmed him. He tried to make it quickly, since too much deliberation might expose him like a fly on the wall if anyone looked up; but the strong rose stem was obscured by a tangle of creepers and branches, and he had to feel his way. He found toeholds in the joined stone blocks, and was able to rest his hand against the top of the ground-floor window cornice. His own breath rose in front of his face in puffs of vapor. Leather gloves protected his hands, but now and then he felt the piercing of a heavy thorn, and the warm blood flowing down the inside of them.

Finally his hand closed around the metal underside of the balcony. He pulled hard on it. It was firmly bolted to the stone, so he swung himself up onto its ledge.

Richard crouched on the balcony, resting, breathing softly. He took an old knife blade and a bent piece of wire out of his jacket and unhooked the latch; then he slipped inside, closing the window after him.

He had hoped the window led onto a hallway, but from the sound he seemed to be in a small chamber. He pulled back an edge of curtain to let some of the night's silver glow in. He felt his way carefully around the furniture. The carpet was as thick and soft as a pelt.

A sudden flash of movement in the corner of his eye froze him. Across the room from the window, a streak of black had shot across the grey surface. Now it was still. He stared across the room into the darkness at it, looked sideways to catch it again. It resolved itself into a small square of light; another window, maybe guarded. He raised his arm silently to shield his eyes, and a slash of black ran across it again.

It was a mirror. He wasn't used to them. Alec was always complaining that their palm-sized disk of polished steel was not big enough to shave by. Richard supposed he could afford to buy a mirror the size of a window; but he didn't like the idea of it hanging on his wall.

He was glad to find that the bedroom door wasn't locked from the outside. The hallway was lit with tapers, a forest of them in the dark. He ducked back behind the door to give his eyes time to adjust to the light. Then he followed the hall to the room he'd marked.

Lord Horn sat in a heavy chair, reading in a circle of light. He didn't hear the door open, but when a floorboard creaked he snapped, "I said

knock first, you damned fool." The lord leaned around the side of the chair to look at the intruder. "And why have you left your post on the stairs?"

St Vier unsheathed his sword.

Horn started convulsively, like a man touched by lightning. He knocked the chair back, and his mouth flapped with a frozen scream.

"It's no good calling your guards," Richard lied, "I've already taken care of them."

It was the first time he had come face to face with the man. Horn was younger than he'd expected, although his face was now hagged with shock. There was nothing to admire in him: he had bungled everything, and finally knew it; he had misused his power and now he would pay. It was quite clear that he knew what was happening. Richard was glad of that; he didn't like making speeches.

"Please—" said Horn.

"Please what?" Richard demanded icily. "Please, you'll never meddle with my affairs again? But you already have."

"Money—" the noble gasped.

"I'm not a thief," said Richard. "I leave it all for your heirs."

Lord Horn walked shakily to his desk and picked up a crystal bird. His hand cupped around it protectively, stroking the smooth glass with longing. "You like a challenge," he murmured, almost seductive.

"I've got one," Richard answered softly. "I want to see how long I can make this last."

First he silenced him, and then he took, very slowly, the life from the four corners of his body, being careful not to render him unrecognizable. Richard never spoke, although the man's wild eyes begged him for it while they could.

He had planned it carefully, and he stuck to what he planned, except that, in the end, he didn't deliver his characteristic blow to the heart. It was unnecessary: the precision would label his work, and he didn't want it to look as though he had mutilated an already dead body.

He unlocked the study window and left again through the garden. No swordsman could afford to be blackmailed.

ALEC WAS SLEEPING, diagonal across the whole bed as usual, one arm flung out with fingers loosely curled over his empty palm. The mark the shackles

had left on his wrist was a dark streak in the pale light.

Richard meant to go and wash first; but Alec stirred and said sleepily, "What is it?"

"I'm back."

Alec rolled over to look at him. The hollows under his cheeks went taut. "You've killed someone," he said. "You should have told me."

"I had to make sure he was at home first."

Alec's long white arms reached out to him. "Tell me now."

Richard fell onto the bed, letting the tall man gather him in. He wasn't tired at all. "You smell strange," Alec said. "Is that blood?"

"Probably."

Alec's tongue touched his ear, like a hunting cat getting the first taste of its prey. "Who have you gone and killed this time?"

"Lord Horn."

He hadn't been sure how Alec would take it. With wonder he felt Alec's body arc sharply against his, Alec's breath let out in an intense, vicious sigh.

"Then no one knows," he said dreamily in his lovely accent. "Tell me about it. Did he scream?" The pulse was beating hard in the hollow of his throat.

"He wanted to, but he couldn't."

"Ahhh." Alec pulled the swordsman's head to him until Richard's mouth lay close by his ear. His hair was warm across Richard's face.

"He begged," Richard said, to please him. "He offered me money."

Alec laughed. "He hit me," Alec said; "and you killed him."

"I hurt him first." Alec's head tipped back. The cords of his neck stood out like vaulting. "I took his hands, then his arms, and his knees…" The breath hissed through Alec's teeth. "He won't touch you again."

"You hurt him…"

Richard kissed the parted lips. Alec's arms bound him like supple iron.

"Tell me," Alec whispered, mouth touching his face; "tell me about it."

THEY SLEPT TOGETHER UNTIL PAST NOON. Then Alec put on some clothes and went downstairs to borrow bread from Marie. In one hand he held a heap of bloody clothes. It was a sunny day, almost as warm as the last one.

He found her in the courtyard, skirts hiked up, already begun on the laundry, and held out the clothes to her.

"Burn those," their landlady said.

"Are you out of your mind?" Alec asked. "It'll make a horrible smell."

"It's up to you." She made no move to take the clothes.

"You look awful," Alec said cheerfully. "What's the matter, someone keep you up all night?"

She began a smile, and dropped it. "This morning. You must have been dead not to hear the racket. I tried to keep 'em quiet, not to let 'em upstairs…"

"You should choose your friends more carefully. What's for breakfast?" He sniffed at her pot of boiling laundry.

"*Don't* you go putting your stuff in there," she said automatically; "that blood'll never come out in hot water."

"I know, I know."

"You know…" Marie grumbled. She liked Alec; he teased her and made her laugh. But it wasn't any good now. "You know what he's done, then?"

Alec shrugged: *So what?* "Got blood all over his clothes. Don't worry, we'll pay you for it."

"With what?" she said darkly. "You going to turn him in for the price on his head?"

For a moment the long face was still. Then he tilted his chin up, eyebrows cooked audaciously. "*Is* there a price on his head? How much?"

"I don't know. They say there might be."

"How do they know he wasn't working under contract?"

She looked scornful. "Down here, they know. Up there, it may take them a little longer to figure it out. But that wasn't any duel. They say that noble was marked up like a shopkeeper's tally, and not with any dagger."

"Oh, well!" Alec sighed blithely. "I guess we'll have to leave town for a while until it's blown over. Too bad: the country's such a bore, but what can you do? Keep bees, or something."

"I suppose…" Marie sounded dubious, but brightened. "After all, everyone else leaves when things get hot. He might as well too. I'll save your rooms, don't you fear."

RICHARD HAD LONG AGO GIVEN UP ARGUING with Alec over the use of his left-hand dagger for cutting bread. Alec claimed it was the only knife they had that cut the pieces fine enough for toasting, and that was that.

"I wish you'd told me," Alec said, slicing Marie's loaf, "that we were going to be leaving town. I would have had my boots re-heeled."

"If you're going to toast cheese, look out for the point on that thing."

"It's not your best knife, what do you care? You haven't answered my question."

"I didn't know you'd asked one."

Alec drew a patient breath. "My dear soul, they're already lining up with banners to see you off, and you're not even packed yet."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Alec fumbled with the toasting knife, and swore when he burnt himself. "I see. They've found Horn, you know."

"Have they? Good. Let me have the cheese."

"It's rotten cheese. It tastes like shoe leather. Cheese is much fresher in the country."

"I don't want to leave. I've got another job coming up."

"You could become a highway robber. It'd be fun."

"It's not fun. You lie in the grass and get wet."

"They've found Horn," Alec tried again, "and they're not happy."

Richard smiled. "I didn't expect them to be. I'll have to stay here for a while."

"In the house?"

"In Riverside. They don't trust us down here, so they aren't going to risk sending the Watch, and spies I can handle myself." It wasn't like Alec to worry about his safety. It made Richard feel warm and content. He was going to curl up in the sun today and let other people worry if they wanted to. After last night he felt secure, better than he had in days. The theater, Alec's abduction, the unpleasant notes, the strange young nobleman, and the killing of the sword-master all faded into a past resolved and dispatched. No one was going to try Horn's little trick again or try to force his hand; and no Riversider who'd heard about it would touch Alec now. And from what Marie was saying, they'd all heard about it. Richard laid precisely the right pattern of pieces of cheese on his bread, and set it on the hearth near enough to the fire so that it would melt without getting brown.

In the long shadows of late afternoon they wandered down to Rosalie's for food and drink. Some little girls were skipping rope in the front yard of the old house. They were dressed, like most Riverside children whose parents acknowledged them, in bright eclectic splendor: scraps of velvet and brocade pieced onto old gowns cut down to size, trimmed with ruffles of varying-colored lace culled from a multitude of stolen handkerchiefs. The jumper's plaits bounced as she chanted:

Mummy told me to have some fun:
Kick the boys and make them run,

"Charming," said Alec.

Kick them 'til they run for cover;
Don't forget my baby brother!
How *many* of *them* did *you* get?
One—Two—Three—Four—

One of the twirlers suddenly missed her beat. The jumper caught her feet in the rope and stumbled. "Sylvie, you goon!" But Sylvie ignored her.

"Hullo, old love!" she called to Richard, just like her grandmother, Rosalie.

"Hullo, Sylvie."

"Got any candy?"

"Not on me, stinker."

She stamped her foot. "Don't call me stinker! That's for babies."

"Sorry, brat." He tried to walk past her, but she blocked the way to the stairs.

"Gramma says you can't come in."

"Why not?"

"There's people looking for you. Have been all day."

"Are they in there now?"

She nodded. "Sure are."

"Armed?"

"I guess so. You gonna kill 'em?"

"Probably. Don't worry, I'll tell your gramma you told me."

"No." Alec caught his sleeve. "Don't. For god's sake, Richard, let's go home."

"Alec…" They couldn't argue out here. Richard nodded at the children. "Do you want to give them a little brass?"

Alec fished in his purse and came up with some coins, which he handed gingerly to Sylvie as though she might bite him.

"Thanks, Richard! Thank you, o my prince!"

A flurry of giggles covered their retreat, mixed with cries of "Sylvie, you goon! I can't believe you did that!"

"What," said Alec, "was *that* all about?"

Richard shrugged. "They've probably made up some story about you. They always do."

"Nasty little objects. I wonder which one made up that rhyme?"

"All little girls say it," said Richard, surprised. "They did it where I grew up."

"Hmph. I don't think *my* sister did. But then, Mother frowned on poetry."

It was perhaps the first time he had mentioned his family. He was tense; the business at Rosalie's had shaken him. Of course, Richard thought: Alec wasn't used to being hunted. And there was no way to reassure him: it could be an unpleasant business, if you let it. It placed constraints on your life that Alec wasn't at all accustomed to. In fact, Alec probably had been right to insist on avoiding Rosalie's once they'd been warned. There was no sense in walking into trouble. But Richard didn't like having to put up with it. Alec, less patient than the swordsman, was going to like the new restrictions even less.

They stopped at Martha's for beer. Unless the informers were working double-time, no one would be looking for him there yet. When they came in there was a stir of movement that subsided into tight-knit groups doing their best to ignore them. It didn't particularly bother St Vier; it was almost welcome relief from the usual fuss they made over him. The two men drank quickly, and left.

"It'll get better come nightfall," Richard told him, walking home. "Everyone's easier then, there's fewer strangers around."

"That's a life for you," said Alec; "just coming out at night, like a mooncrawler."

Richard looked curiously at him. "I don't think it'll come to that."

The rapid patter of footsteps behind them put an end to the discussion.

"Move," said Richard, hand on his sword. "Into that doorway."

For once, Alec did as he was told. Already it was dusk under the lowering eaves of the close-set houses. Their pursuer rounded the corner at too fast a clip to have a prayer of holding ground against the swordsman standing ready.

The small white figure skidded to a halt. "Holy *Lucy!*" Nimble Willie swore. "Master St Vier, for godsakes put that thing away, and come into that doorway."

"Alec's already in there."

"That's all right," the doorway interjected, "we'll have a lovely time. What the hell's the matter with you, Willie," Alec demanded, emerging from it, "coursing like a stoat after rabbits?"

"Sorry," Willie panted. He motioned them off to one side; what he had to say wasn't fit for the middle of the street. "Don't go home that way. Cut through Blind Max's Alley; they're watching Dolphin's Cross."

"How many?"

"Three. City toughs, with swords, out for the reward."

"There's a reward?"

"Not for you yet. It's just the usual; for suspects to be brought in. But these boys think it's you—they might be friends of those other two you killed last week."

Richard sighed wearily. "I'd better kill them."

"No, wait!" cried Willie. "Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"They've already paid me. I figured it'd be easy to give them the slip. But if one gets away, I'll be in for it…"

St Vier sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Willie…all right. Only for you. I'll just keep away from Dolphin's Cross."

Alec paid him without having to be reminded.

THE HOUSE SEEMED QUIET. It was set in a cul-de-sac where no one in his right mind would want to take on St Vier. Nevertheless, he went first up the stairs, scanning for reckless intruders. There was nobody, not even a neighbor.

"God," Alec huffed, throwing himself down on their old chaise longue. "Hadn't we better check under the beds?"

Richard answered his real question. "I don't think they'll come in here. Even if they can get someone to show them the way, people don't like to attack a swordsman on his own ground."

"I see." Alec sat thoughtfully, turning the rings on his fingers. After a while he got up and found the Nature treatise with the burgundy leather binding and half its pages missing. He flipped through it while Richard limbered up and began practicing. The grey cat came and sat on Alec's lap, trying to interpose her head between his eyes and the page. He scratched her chin, and finally snapped the book shut irritably and replaced it on the mantel, taking instead his worn philosophy text. Finally he gave up all pretense of reading, and watched the swordsman steadily working his body through parrys and extensions and recoils so quick and intricate Alec's eye couldn't make out the discrete elements. All he could do was sense their perfection, a dance made of deadly movements whose goal was not to entertain.

For a while Alec seemed to be drowsing, like the cat on his lap, eyes half-shut watching the swordsman. Only his hand moved, idling along the cat's spine, deep in the lush fur finding the ridges of its bones. The cat was purring; Alec put his fingers on its throat, and left them there.

The frenzy of Richard's movements had slowed to a deliberate pace. It was the cat's favorite stalking game, but Alec's fingers left her too sedated to care. Richard's body obeyed him in his tortuous demands, and Alec watched.

"You know," Alec said conversationally, "they would be so pleased if anything were to happen to you."

"Hh?" It came out a grunt.

"Your friends. They'd finally get their chance at me."

"You'd have to leave." Richard put up his sword and began slowly stretching his muscles out. "They wouldn't follow you out of Riverside."

"If you were dead." Alec finished the thought bluntly.

The anger surprised Richard. "Well, yes."

Alec's voice was low, almost harsh with repressed fury. "It doesn't particularly bother you."

"Well, I'm a swordsman." He shrugged, no easy feat with his head touching the floor. "If I stay active, I can't last much past thirty. There'll be someone better someday."

"You don't care." Alec was still lounging picturesquely, long limbs on display; but the rigidness of his hands clenched on the frayed upholstery betrayed him.

"It's all right," Richard said; "it's what happens."

"Then what," Alec articulated with crystalline clarity, "in hell are you doing all that practicing for?"

Richard picked up his sword. "Because I want to be good." He lifted it over his head and dived at the wall the way he would at an opponent who'd uncovered his front guard.

"So you can give them a really good fight before they kill you?"

Richard twisted and came in high again, his wrist arced like a falcon stooping. "Mm-hm."

"Stop it," Alec said very quietly. "Stop it."

"Not now, Alec, I'm—"

"*I said, stop it!*" Alec rose to his full height, towering and angular in his wrath. His eyes were green as emeralds uncovered in a casket. Richard put the sword down and kicked it into a corner. When he looked up he saw the raised hand, knew Alec was going to hit him, and stayed still as the palm crashed across his face.

"You coward," Alec said coldly. He was breathing heavily and his cheeks were bright. "What are you waiting for?"

"Alec," Richard said. His face stung. "Do you want me to hit you?"

"You don't dare." Alec raised his hand again, but this time Richard caught it, gripping the bony wrist that was so much frailer than his own. Alec twisted the wrong way, making Richard hurt him. "I'm not enough of a challenge," he hissed through gritted teeth, "that's it, isn't it? It would make you *look* bad. You wouldn't enjoy it."

"Enough," Richard said; "it's enough." He knew he was holding Alec too hard; he was afraid to let go.

"No, it isn't enough," the man in his hands was saying. "It's enough for you—it's always enough for you, but not for me. Talk to me, Richard—if you're afraid to use your hands, then talk to me."

"I can't," Richard said. "Not the way you do. Alec, please—you know you don't want this. Stop it."

"*Please,*" Alec said, still pulling against his arm as though he were ready to start hitting him again; "that's a new one from you. I think I like it. Say it again."

Richard's own hands sprang open; he flung himself away from the other man. "Look," he shouted, "what do you want from me?"

Alec smiled his feral smile. "You're upset," he said.

Richard could feel himself shaking. Tears of rage were still burning behind his eyes, but at least he could see again, the room was losing its red tinge. "Yes," he managed to say.

"Come here," Alec said. His voice was long and cool like slopes of snow. "Come to me."

He walked across the room. Alec lifted his chin and kissed him. "You're crying, Richard," Alec said. "You're crying."

The tears burned his eyes like acid. They made his face feel raw. Alec lowered him to the floor. At first he was rough, and then he was gentle.

IN THE END, IT WAS ALEC WHO COULDN'T CRY. "I want to," he said, curled on Richard's chest, fingers digging into him as though he were slipping down a rock face. "I want to, but I can't."

"You don't really want to," Richard said, his hand cupped around Alec's head. "It makes your nose run. It makes your eyes red."

Alec gave a strangled laugh and clutched him tighter. He tried an experimental sniff, and gasped with a sudden convulsion of some emotion: misery, or frustration. "It's no good," he said. "I can't."

"It doesn't matter," Richard said, stroking him. "You'll learn."

"If I'd known you were such an expert I would have made you teach me long ago."

"I offered to teach you the sword. It seemed more useful."

"Not to me," Alec said automatically. "Did you know you were talking just now, too? It sounded like you were reciting poetry."

Richard smiled. "I didn't notice. It might have been."

"I didn't know you knew any poetry."

Richard knew that he ought to be upset. He had just been thoroughly overturned by Alec: had lost his temper, lost his control, behaved in ways

he didn't even know he could. But Alec had caught him as he fell, had taken pleasure in it. And now he felt wonderful, as long as he didn't think hard about it. There was no need to think. He never wanted to move again; he never wanted Alec's head to shift from the crook of his shoulder, or the warmth of their legs entwined to dissolve. "I know a lot of poetry," he answered. "My mother used to say it to me. Old things, mainly."

"Something about the wind, and someone's face."

After a while, he began to grow younger.
The years were tom from his face
Like leaves scattered before the wind…
In the end, she made all others seem impossible.

"That's an old one," he explained, "about a man who was taken by the Faery Queen."

"I've never heard it." Alec nestled under his chin, lulled by the words. "Tell it to me."

Richard thought for a minute, reaching back for the beginning, absently stroking Alec's hair:

It was never cold under the hill, and never dark.
But the light was not a light for seeing. It deceived.
He tried to remember the sun,
To remember remembering the moon.
He thought—

Alec's hand was at his lips.

"You've *got* to go!" His voice cracked. "They won't let you walk out of this, they don't dare! I *know them*, Richard!"

Richard tightened his arm around Alec's shoulders, wordlessly trying to comfort, to drain the tension from the anguished spirit.

But the touch was not enough. "Richard, I *know* them—they won't let you live!" He turned his face in to Richard's chest, his body clenched again in a frozen spasm not of weeping but of fury.

At a loss, Richard turned again to the words that still flowed through his mind like water:

Day followed day, with never night between:
Feasting and all manner of delight
Hedged him 'round like hounds their quarry's heart—

"I'm cold," Alec said suddenly.

He knew that arbitrary voice: it was as warm and familiar to him as bread. "Well, we are on the floor," he answered.

"We should get into bed." Alec propped himself on one elbow to observe, "Your clothes are all a mess."

"That can be fixed." Richard stripped his shirt off in an easy motion, and helped Alec to his feet.

"You look as though you've been in a fight," Alec said complacently.

"A lot you know about that. I look," he said, "as though someone's tried to tear my clothes off."

"Someone has."

They were warm that night, never apart long enough to be cold. They talked for hours in the dark; and when words were not enough they were silent. At last they slept, twined helplessly in each other's arms.

Some time in the morning, when the light was still grey, Richard felt Alec slip out of bed beside him. He didn't even open his eyes; just sighed and rolled over, spreading into the spot where Alec's warmth had been.

When Richard came fully awake, it was full daylight. He got up and opened the shutters. Sun streaked the floor in long buttery bars. Richard stretched, feeling the glories of the night in his whole body. Nothing hurt: even the memory of tears and pain produced only a warm glow, the distillation of raw spirits into liquor.

Alec was up and dressed already, his clothes gone from the top of the chest. Richard didn't smell cooking; maybe he was out getting food. Or he might be sitting in the front room, reading. Richard thought, all in all, that it might be a good thing for them to eat and go back to bed.

He heard a noise in the other room, body on upholstery, and pictured Alec sprawled on the chaise longue with a book in his hands, waiting for him to get up. He knew he was smiling senselessly, and didn't care.

He stared at the empty chaise for a moment longer than necessary. The cat leapt down across it, wanting to be petted.

He felt something wrong in the room. There was no presence of intruders. Something was out of place, a space rearranged…He looked again and saw it at once: Alec's books were missing from their corner. Not, he hoped, another bout of self-righteous poverty! Alec was always trying to pawn things, but who would want his books? At least he'd taken his own stuff this time—

But he hadn't. The richest things he owned, the most worth pawning, those he had left behind, in plain sight on the mantelpiece. The rings that Richard had given him, that he'd had so much trouble accepting, lay in a heap together, regardless of their beauty. Richard looked, unwilling to touch them: the pearl, the diamond, the rose, the emerald, the dragon brooch…all but the ruby; that he had taken with him.

There was no note. Richard couldn't have read it, and Alec knew this time he would not ask someone else to read it for him. The meaning of the things he'd left behind was clear: he'd taken only what he thought of as his. He wasn't coming back.

It was plain enough what had happened. Alec was fed up with life in Riverside. He'd never really been suited to it. And Horn's killing would make it harder. Alec had been badly shaken yesterday by the first signs of the caution they would have to use for a while. He might be afraid of a manhunt. Maybe he meant to wait it out, come back when the danger was past…Richard closed his mind to the thought, like a key turning a lock. He would not wait for Alec. If Alec chose to return, Richard would be here. If not, life would go on as it had before him.

He couldn't blame Alec, really. Leaving was the sensible thing to do. Most people thought so. Alec had a right to decide for himself. Everyone has their limits, the border between what they can and cannot tolerate. Alec had tried to tell him; but Richard had been too confident, too sure of himself—and, frankly, too used to ignoring Alec's complaints to give any heed to this one. Not that it would have changed anything. Richard had no intention of skulking out of the city just when it needed his presence to remind them all of how dangerous it was to cross him. And he could hardly run from Riverside as though he were afraid of his own peers.

He found himself back in the bedroom, looking in the clothes press. Alec's fur-lined winter cloak was still there, along with two shirts, his old jacket with the braid, odds and ends. He'd left wearing only his scholar's

robe over the clothes he'd had on yesterday. Only what he could walk in. It angered Richard; the fool was going to be cold, summer was still a good way off…But of course, he thought, Alec had gone where he didn't need old clothes. He wouldn't just have walked aimlessly out into the street, he was too proud for that. And he wouldn't have gone back to the University, not after what he'd said against it. But he never did speak of his family. That meant something. Of course they must be rich. Of course he was a lord, or a lord's son. They would be furious with him, but they'd have to take him in. His future was secure.

It made Richard feel vastly relieved. Alec was, in essence, back where he belonged. He would never again be cold in winter, or drink inferior wines. He'd marry well, but know where his other desires lay. Last night, in his farewell, he'd proved that.

Richard shut the chest. Mingled with the smell of wool and cedar was the faint aroma of meadowgrass. He'd have to see to giving away the clothes. But not now. A long fine hair was caught on one of his fingers. He untwisted it; it glowed chestnut in the sunlight as it drifted to the floor.

chapter XXII

LORD BASIL HALLIDAY PUT HIS FACE IN HIS HANDS and tried to massage some of the heat out of his eyeballs. When the door opened he sat perfectly still, recognizing the sound and scent of his wife's presence.

Lady Mary looked at the undisturbed bedding still spread invitingly on the couch, pressed her lips together, and said nothing to the man sitting bent over the table littered with crumbs and empty glasses. She drew back the curtains to let in daylight, and snuffed what was left of the candles.

"You just missed Chris Nevilleson." Her husband roused himself to converse. "He ate the last of the seedcakes. We'll have to remember he likes them."

"I'll remember." She stood behind him, her cool hands on his brow. He leaned his head back into the soft satin of her morning-robe.

"I *did* sleep," he said defensively; "I just didn't lie down."

"There are no more seedcakes," she told him, "but there are fresh rolls and eggs. I'll have them brought in, with dark chocolate."

He pulled her head down to kiss. "There are no more like you," he said. "If it's a daughter, we'll name her Mary."

"We will not. It's too confusing, Basil. And we should name her something pretty…Belinda?" He laughed and smoothed her hair. "What did Chris have to say?"

With regret he returned to the night's activities. "What I've been sure of all along. It was a swordsman, not a ruffian's murder. Nothing was stolen.

And Horn had lately increased his guard. Someone broke into the house expressly to kill him. That looks like a duel, simple enough. But none of our people has been able to ferret out any rumor of a challenge called out against Horn, or any reason for one. He had no debts, his reputation for once was clear…No one much liked Asper, really, but he was harmless. His political importance was over the day his friend the old Crescent died…" He stopped himself and shook his head. "Sorry. Of course you already know that. Well, Chris was there tonight at the examination. There was no question but that it was the work of one skilled sword. A virtuoso job, in fact. As if someone had left a calling card. But who? Chris said Horn's hired swordsmen looked positively green. We're holding them for questioning, but I think it's pointless. They didn't do it. Someone flashy and brilliant and crazy did it, and he's out there walking free in my city right now."

"It might be private justice," Mary said, "such as swordsman practice amongst themselves."

"Against a Council Lord? Utter madness. It *must* have been another noble's challenge, it's the only way anyone would dare…Maybe something new will come to light, maybe someone will declare himself. A swordsman with a grievance against Horn could have sought redress from the civil court, or even from the Council of Lords."

"But with what hope of gaining it?" his wife asked gently. "The nobles have too much power in the city, you say so yourself." He opened his mouth to defend himself, but she silenced him with the pressure of her hand, which said she knew already and agreed. "But even if it was a swordsman working under contract, one doesn't like to think of a man using his skill for such an unclean death."

"St Vier," Halliday said, "always strikes one blow straight to the heart. I have always thought, if I were challenged to the death, I would prefer it be by him."

"Seville, then, perhaps, or Torrion…"

"Yes, you're right." Halliday passed a hand over his unshaven face. "The first thing is to identify the swordsman himself. There are far fewer good ones around than there are men with money who carry grudges. All the major ones will have to make depositions, and lay bond not to leave the city until this matter is settled. The murder of a Council Lord strikes too

near the center of our peace. I'm having the roads watched, offering rewards for information…

"Meanwhile, Mary, I've called up some of our own people to strengthen the house guard. And you—please don't go out alone. Not now."

She pressed his hand to tell him she'd look after her safety as carefully as he would.

He knew he should sleep, or go and tend to business; but even more than he needed rest he needed to offer his thoughts to her. "It's the problem of a system that incorporates swordsmen. They say without them we'd be doing all the work of killing each other ourselves; like the olden days, the streets full of miniature wars, and every house a fortress…But swordsmen are a wild card. They're only useful under the strictest codes…"

Still talking, he let her lead him to the couch. They sat side by side, leaning only slightly against each other, alert for the first sounds of intrusion, the demands of government and housekeeping.

"Basil," she asked when he finally paused, "do you have to do it all yourself? If it's a murder, the city can investigate. Chris can act as liaison."

"I know…but it's the slaying of a Council Lord, and with a sword. Which means it still might turn out to be a matter of honor—or something else we don't want to make common knowledge. I'm the head of the Council. I want to go on being the head of the Council—or so everyone keeps telling me. Silly or not, Horn was a member of government. And I have to look after my own. Whoever killed him was a poacher on a very private estate." Despite himself, his eyes kept dropping shut. "Horn…I'll have to stop calling him that. There'll be a new Lord Horn now. His grandson, I think…"

She waited until she was sure he was asleep before getting up. One poor dead man, she was thinking, and the whole city threatens to crumble. Mary Halliday pulled the curtains in the study closed again, and let herself quietly out of the door.

A FINE FALL OF RAIN HUNG LIKE A CURTAIN of mist over the city, veiling one section from another across the long stretches of sky dividing them. The various greys of the city's stone glittered and glowed with the sheen of the water on them; but that was an effect best admired from indoors, preferably through a pane of window-glass. The Daw's Nest in Riverside didn't have

one. It didn't have much, except an interesting clientele and enough for them to drink. There was always something going on there. One section of the earthen floor had been a mumblety-peg arena for as long as anyone could remember.

What really made it attractive was its location: on the south bank of Riverside, far from the Bridge and any encroaching of upper city life. No one who didn't belong in Riverside got this far in. When he didn't have to make himself available for job contracts, Hugo Seville found it a good place to relax.

"Your star is on the rise," a fortune-teller was informing him. "Terrible things are happening in the upper houses…"

"You wouldn't know an upper house from the back of your neck," a failed physician growled at her. "You can't even chart your way home from this place."

She hissed at him.

"Never mind," Ginnie Vandall consoled her; "Ven can't even *see* his way home. Go on, Julia." Ginnie didn't believe in fortune-telling per se, but she understood the techniques involved: a judicious blend of gossip and personal assessment. She did have faith in gossip, and in Hugo's susceptibility to flattery. Ginnie's hair was a new bright red, her bodice purple. She sat on the arm of Hugo's chair enjoying herself.

"The Sword of Justice is lifted high in the northern quadrant, ready to strike. The Sword…Do you want to see the cards?"

"No," said the swordsman.

"Hugo," his mistress caressed his golden curls, "why not?"

"They're creepy."

"They're powerful," said Julia, unwrapping them. She handed the deck to Hugo. "Cut them."

"Oh, never mind," said Ginnie Vandall. "I'll do it." The rings on her fingers glowed against the dull backs of the cards. She gave them a professional shuffle and handed them back to Julia, who laid them out in an incomprehensible pattern.

"Money."

One of Ginnie's crew of friends looked on, hanging over her shoulder. "Lucky lady. You know who's worth a lot these days?"

Ginnie said, “He’s always been worth a lot. Only this time he hasn’t got any choice about it.” It was hard to tell whether she was pleased.

“I’m talking about St Vier.”

“I know,” said Ginnie Vandall.

“He doesn’t dare to leave Riverside now. Someone’s going to turn him in: what they’re paying out for information alone’s enough to…”

“No swordsman’s going to turn him in,” Hugo rumbled. He could be forbidding when he wanted to.

“Well, no,” Ginnie’s friend simpered; “you’ve just gone up on the Hill and made your depositories, haven’t you?”

“Depositions,” Ginnie corrected sharply. “Well, of course. It’s crazy not to clear yourself when you can. Sign a piece of paper, give them some money and promise not to leave town. Let them think we want to cooperate—keep them from coming down here and snooping around…”

“Well, that’s just what I’m saying,” her friend insisted: “When all the swordsmen have gone up to say they didn’t do it, it’s going to look funny if he’s missing, isn’t it?”

“That’s not proof, though,” Ginnie said; “not enough to hang him.”

Hugo pulled his pretty Ginnie over to him. “The whole thing’s a pain. Nothing funny about it.”

“They don’t need enough information to hang him yet, they just want something they can arrest him on, or try to. The reward’ll be astronomical.”

Solemnly, Hugo lifted his cup. “To information.”

“Think they’ll catch him?”

“Not if he hides.”

Hugo said, “His boyfriend’s probably turning him in right now. Shifty bastard. Just like in the play.”

Ginnie sneered. “Alec? He’s not that shifty. He’s got butterflies for brains.”

“Think it was the Tragedy that did it for him?”

“Did what?” said Ginnie languidly. “Wait and see if the fight kills him first.”

Hugo laughed. It caught in his throat when he saw St Vier come through the doorway. He nudged Ginnie but she paid no mind, so he let his laughter continue to its natural end.

Richard ignored the little group in the corner. Ginnie Vandall was draped over Hugo like a carpet claiming its owner. They were laughing over some fortune cards. Ven, the drunken old bonesetter, got up and shuffled over to St Vier.

"You're young," Ven said thickly; "you should live! Don't fart around with these types. Get out of here while you can."

"I like it here," said Richard, and turned away. Ven stumbled forward and clutched at the swordsman's arm. The next second the old man was rolling on the floor. "Don't do that," Richard said, straightening his sleeve. "Next time it'll be steel."

"Hey!" an old woman protested. "He don't mean no harm. What're you pushing people around for?"

The barmaid cautioned her, "Leave him alone, Marty. He's a swordsman, you know how they can get. What's your drink, master?"

The beer was not as good as Rosalie's, but it was better than Martha's. Alec would have something to say about it. Alec would start a fight. He always seemed to like fights on rainy days.

Richard wandered over to watch the mumblety-peg tournament for a while. He'd been addicted to the game when he first came to Riverside, having finally found some people who were as good with a knife as he was. He was better than any of the ones playing now, though. The players' bodies were close together, not letting anyone in.

He wouldn't come here again; it was not a good idea to establish a recognizable pattern of habits now. Soon the price would be fixed on his head—funny expression, like a hat.

He wasn't interested in Julia's cards. Hugo and Ginnie were laughing again as he went out the door.

ALTHOUGH IT WAS ONLY A SHORT WALK to the Hallidays', Lord Christopher ordered up his carriage because of his companion. He was proud of himself; he felt as if he were bringing home a trophy. A liveried footman brought them into the Crescent Chancellor's presence.

"Tell him," Lord Christopher prompted the nervous, overdressed woman. She was small, pretty in a garish way, with painted eyes. "He's the second noble witness we need to make your testimony official, and you can't do much better. We'll record it; then you can go."

"I'll want my mm-money," she said, her clipped Riverside speech marred by a stammer.

"Of course you'll have it," said Basil Halliday. He nodded to his secretary to begin the transcription. "Go ahead."

"Well, the man you want's St Vier. Everyone knows it."

"How do they know it?"

She shrugged. "How do you know anything? People don't mm-make mm-mistakes like that. He mm-must have told someone. But you can ss-see it. Nnn-nobody else that fast, or d-does that good a j-j-job." Chris winced.

"Do you know why he did it?"

"He's a bb-bastard. Probably that scholar told him to."

"What scholar?"

"Some bb-boy he had with him. Who knows? Swordsmen are all crazy. You just pay me, and I'm getting out of this city and hope I never see another one."

She left, and the two noblemen signed the transcript. Halliday swore bitterly. "The one man I was sure of!"

"Its no good," Christopher said sensibly, disturbed to see his mentor so distressed. "They all tell the same story. Unless it's a conspiracy…"

"Among thieves?"

"It isn't very likely," Chris continued earnestly. "That leaves us with a handful of consistent testimonies, and the depositions of every other notable sword in town. St Vier must be arrested on suspicion of Horn's death."

"So he must," said Halliday heavily. "Now how do you propose we get him out of Riverside?"

Lord Christopher picked up a pen, opened his mouth, put it down, and shut it.

"Never mind," said Halliday a bit more gently. "I won't have to call in my own land guard. It's very simple, really: we cry the arrest, post the reward, and wait for someone to turn him in."

A FIRE WAS BURNING BRIGHTLY IN THE Duchess Tremontaine's little parlor. The curtains were pulled back, the better for their owner to savor the contrast with the rain outside. She sat curled up in a round chair of velvet,

her feet tucked under her, enjoying the comfort and surveying a delightful incongruity.

He stood dripping in her doorway, a lanky figure in tattered black flanked by the gilded cherubs guarding the entrance.

"You're very wet," she observed. "You shouldn't have stayed out in the rain so long."

"I didn't think you'd admit me."

"I have left standing orders to admit you." She lifted her cordial glass; the crystal chimed melodiously off the gold tray. "I suppose you're out of money again?"

"You suppose right." His tone mirrored hers. "But that's not why I came." He released from the folds of his robe the one rich thing about him, glowing on his finger like a heart of fire. "Look what I've brought."

"Goodness!" The duchess raised her fine eyebrows. "Now how did that manage to find its way back to you?"

"It doesn't matter." He scowled. "You really shouldn't let it our of the house."

"You said you didn't want it anymore. The scene is clearly imprinted on my memory: I can see it when I close my eyes." She did so. "I can see it when I open my eyes, too: you were just as badly dressed, although of course you were drier."

"I don't think I have ever been wetter. You should get someone to do something about all that rain."

"Sit down," she said in a friendly tone that did not conceive of disobedience. She patted a cushion at her side. "If you're going to trust me, you'll have to tell me everything."

"I'm not going to trust you."

"Then why did you come, my dear?"

The knuckles of his hand whitened, his fingers storming around the ring. She'd never managed to teach him to hide his thoughts, which had a marked predilection for denying reality—when he was aware of its existence.

At last he sat, arms tightly clasped around his knees, staring rigidly at the fire. "All right," he said. "I'll tell you what I know if you'll do the same."

"I already know what I know," the duchess said sweetly. "Why don't you dry yourself off while I send for some little iced cakes?"

chapter XXIII

IT WAS GETTING HARDER AND HARDER FOR WILLIE to find St Vier these days. Which was good, in a way: Master St Vier had always been fair to him, and was a great sword; Willie wished him well in this adventure. But he resented having to consider leaving messages for him with Marie: there was nothing and no one Nimble Willie couldn't find; that was known, and was going to stay known. Still, as the shadows of the afternoon got longer, it began to look as though he'd miss his mark entirely, which was bad for his reputation and his purse—plus it would annoy St Vier to miss a message. Disconsolately, Willie turned his feet toward Marie's; after all, there was still the chance St Vier might be home, although it was less likely these days. His route brought him past Rosalie's tavern. He decided to stop in for a consoling drink.

He couldn't believe his eyes, so he rubbed them, but there was still the dark head of the swordsman. No one was sitting near him, but he seemed unperturbed. He was eating stew.

Willie sidled up to Lucas Tanner. "What's *he* doing here?"

"I don't know," Tanner rumbled, "but I wish to hell he'd leave."

"Trouble?" Willie looked ready to sprint.

Tanner shrugged. "There's a price on him, you know that. I'm not interested myself, but you never know who is. Makes people edgy; hard to have a good time."

Willie scanned the room for unreliable strangers. There was a man he didn't know talking to one of the women, but he looked pretty drunk, and harmless.

"I had a price on my head once," Willie said wistfully. "I was pretty young, see, and nervous. It was some old guy with a really nice cane, not much bigger than me. I felt pretty bad after."

"How did they find out it was you?"

"Somebody saw me. It was up on Gatling Street, in the city. They just about got me, too, but I slipped away and got over the Bridge, and didn't I just keep close for a while after that!" Tanner nodded. "I just about starved; no way of getting money for a bit. But nobody turned me in; we don't do things like that down here."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Hard to catch him, anyway, without a troop. But it may come to that."

Willie laughed. "A troop? You're crazy. They'd be ankle-deep in dead cats and rotten eggs before they were halfway down the Loop. Not to mention thrown stones," he added reflectively, his innocent face lit with soft pleasure.

"You want a riot, you can have one. Not but I wouldn't fight if it came to that; but why won't he just leave town! Make everything easier."

Willie nodded over at the man peacefully eating his supper. "You tell him."

"I'm no friend of his…" Tanner muttered.

"Wouldn't matter," said Willie with cheerful wickedness; "he'd kill you anyway!"

Nevertheless he approached the swordsman carefully. It was the opposite of stalking prey: you definitely wanted him to know you were coming.

Richard saw him, and saw that Willie actually wanted to speak to him, unlike most people these days. "Hello, Willie," he said, and swung a stool out for him. Richard didn't waste time with preliminaries: idle conversation in public places was not what anyone wanted him for. "What's the word?"

"You won't believe who I saw," Willie said chattily, "uptown and dressed like nothing going!"

Richard's heart chose that moment to become athletic; but he managed to match Willie's tone: "Oh? Who?"

"Kathy Blount! Hermia's girl, that was. You remember her."

"Yes, I do." His pulse settled back to its plodding motion.

"She says she'd like to see you again sometime. You've got the luck, haven't you?"

He had put the Tremontaine job out of his mind, being more concerned with the business at hand, and not having heard from them in weeks, not since their "Delay." It might not be a bad idea now: give him something to do, and enough money to see out the summer. He'd have to be more cautious slipping out of Riverside, but he could manage.

"Says she'll be at the Dog tomorrow night, say, if you're free."

"Thanks, Willie."

The swordsman's lack of surprise at his news had not escaped Nimble Willie. Still, he leaned over to Richard, lowering his voice: "Look, I think it's a trap. Sure, the Dog's in Riverside, but only just barely. You don't want to meet anyone anywhere for a while, Master St Vier, not when they know you're coming."

"Maybe." It was true, after all; the Brown Dog tavern stood closest to the Bridge. Its clientele consisted almost solely of city people looking for thrills, and Riversiders eager to fleece them. It was within shouting distance of the Watch. But where else could Katherine meet him safely? He had said he would help her if she was in trouble; it might not even be the job at all. "Was that all the message?" he asked. "Not quite. She said something funny about a ring."

The ruby was gone, gone with Alec. If they needed it now they'd have to ask him for it. "What about it?"

"She said she knows where it is now. That's all."

Willie saw with nervousness how St Vier's fist clenched on the table. But the swordsman's face remained calm. Willie was glad he only carried the messages.

IN THE END, RICHARD CHOSE TO GO. He said to Marie on his way out, "Look, there's a chance I won't be coming back tonight. If you hear anything certain, take what I owe you out of the rosewood chest, and do what you want with the rest of the stuff."

She didn't ask where he was going. These days she liked to be able to tell people who came asking that she didn't know.

He hadn't eaten any supper yet; the best thing about the Dog was its food. When he was new to the city he'd gone there a lot; it was a good place for young people of all professions to pick up work. He and Alec had taken to dropping in every few weeks: Alec liked the food, and liked dicing with the city people because they bet high and they were even clumsier cheaters than he was. But drunken young men were always challenging Richard there to impress their friends; one night one of them had annoyed Alec, and Richard had ended up killing him, putting a strain on St Vier's relationship with the tavern keeper.

No one seemed to be following him as he took the long way round. The tavern shone like sunrise at the end of the street, its doorway alight with beacons like any uptown establishment. The light showed no one waiting for him by the entrance. Over it hung the brown dog, a large painted wood carving that bore no resemblance to any living breed.

Inside was just as well lit. The place had a carnival atmosphere, fevered and bright. Richard felt as though he'd stepped outside Riverside into another world. Whores were talking animatedly with well-dressed men, completely ignoring the gaudy ones whose hands shuffled and reshuffled decks of cards, who might be their neighbors or brothers. A couple of nobles in half-masks leaned against the wall, trying to look detached and amused, their eyes darting here and there about the room glittering in the mask slits, their naked hands playing on the pommels of the swords they wore for security. Richard thought he would pass unnoticed amongst them, but he saw how the card players deliberately flattened their eyes against seeing him, how the whores turned their backs and raised their volume. Riversiders didn't turn each other in; they just stopped knowing you. That way was easier. It told him he was recognized, though, and warned him that not everyone might be so considerate.

He didn't see Katherine, which further roused his suspicion. His sword hung, a solid weight, at his side. He touched it under his cloak and found the tavern keeper edging up to him.

Harris had his perpetual harried, unctuous expression. "Now, sir, if you will recall an adventure I would not like repeated…" He rarely spoke in sentences, but in insinuation; people said he had started as a pimp.

"I'll be careful," Richard promised. "Who's here tonight?"

Harris shrugged. “The usual…” he said vaguely. “You understand, I don’t want trouble…”

Something made Richard turn around. He was not entirely surprised to see Katherine coming through the doorway. He waited until she saw him, then moved to a table with a good command of the room, brushing past a pretty-boy lolling in the lap of a heavily powdered man who was feeding him whisky in small glasses.

Katherine followed, ridiculously relieved that Richard was here already. He moved through the room with careful assurance, betraying no sign of nervousness, although watchfulness glowed off him like magic. It almost surprised her that the entire room didn’t rise up and follow him: Richard at work was more than impressive, he was magnetic. He wanted to be sought after for his skill; but the nobles desired him for his performance.

She couldn’t keep her hands from twisting together, so she hid them under the table. Absurdly, Richard said, “Thank you for coming.”

She said, “You weren’t at the Old Bell last week.”

“Was I supposed to be?”

“Not if you didn’t know. Of course he didn’t tell you.”

“Who? Willie?” Her silence made it plain. “Alec.”

A young woman cruised by their table, and smiled into Katherine’s eyes like an old friend. Richard’s hand moved a fraction on the table, ready to take action if she needed it. But Katherine shook her head. “I can’t stand it in here,” she said fretfully. “Can we go out?”

“Where?” Richard asked. “Shall we go deeper into Riverside? You don’t mind?”

“It doesn’t matter.” There was a dull edge of hysteria to her voice that made his taut nerves quiver.

“Katherine.” He would have taken her hand if he could. “Were you sent here, or did you come yourself? If it’s business, we’ll get it over quickly and you can go.”

She glanced quickly behind her. “I came,” she said. “On my own.”

Anger surged and hardened in him. With a cause to form around, his nerves twisted together into a strong cord of purpose. It was too long since he had had a real fight, too long that he had been sitting, waiting.

“It’s bad, then,” he said quietly, without any gentleness. “Ferris has done you no good. Never mind. You don’t have to tell me about it. I said I would

help you and I will."

He couldn't see his own face, set and white with a rage whose coolness his eyes betrayed by being too wide, too blue, too fixed. It was a look she had seen only once before in him, and it froze the life in her bones. "Richard," she whispered, "*please*—"

"It's all right," he said calmly. "We'll leave here, go somewhere else where we can talk. Do you need a place to stay? Don't worry. You should have known I'd come."

"Come, then," she echoed, rising from the table. She was shaking with chill. She wanted to run, to push her way out of the tavern, to flinch from the cold swordsman walking beside her. She took his arm, and together they made a way past the card players and revelers, out of the doorway into the orange light burning a hole in the dark street. "There," he said; "better?"

She held him tighter as a shadow fell across them. Behind them the door had opened, blocked by dark figures. To the right and to the left, and in front of them the shadows had become men, ringing the aura of light with solid darkness.

"Richard St Vier?"

"Yes?"

"In the name of the Council I charge you to stand—"

He flung her reeling into the darkness, but her weight had held his arm too long, and he drew his sword only as the first of the wooden staves crashed into him.

The impact staggered him back, but he did not fall. The next one drove the breath from his side. He turned blindly in a new direction, where he thought the attack might come. His eyes cleared and he saw the staff descending, glowing like a comet with pain. His cut went wild but so did the staff. The man's guard was down; Richard followed his torch-gold blade true to its mark, and heard the man cry out a moment before the thwack of another blow caught St Vier across the shoulders. His knees hit the ground, but he kept hold of his sword and was on his feet again, just like practice, only he would pay for this later. This time he saw the staff come swinging out of the darkness toward his face. He almost raised his sword to break the blow; but steel would not stand up to oak, so he ducked instead, and missed the one that caught him in the back of his legs.

There certainly were a lot of them. He fell sprawling, scraping his hands along the stone. His sword was gone—he felt for the hilt, somewhere nearby, but the cobbles seemed to be coursing with light. Not light but pain. He was seeing pain flowing like gold, like a basket full of jewels and summer fruit.

He heard roaring in his ears, and a voice he agreed with shrieking, "Stop it! Please stop it, that's enough!"

But they weren't ready to stop until the swordsman had ceased rolling and dodging and lay perfectly still. Then the Watch picked up their prize and carried him over the north Bridge. The prison where he would eventually rest lay on the south side of the river. They'd bring him there by boat, in the daylight.

Nimble Willie waited silent in the shadows of a bridge parapet for the knot of men to pass him. Except for their staves, nothing to attract attention. But he guessed before chance showed him the face of the man they carried.

"Oh, Master St Vier," he murmured to himself in the shadows; "this is a terrible thing."

And Katherine Blount returned to the one who had sent her. She managed to make a clear report; then she asked for brandy, and was given a large decanter without question.

chapter XXIV

LORD MICHAEL GODWIN LAY BACK on the embroidered cushions of his couch, loosened his shirt collar, and tried to encourage himself to be hungry. He thought about early winter mornings after hunting, and about interminable music recitals before dinner. But the expanse of dishes set before him grew no more alluring. He wondered how the small, agile men around him managed. They were cheerfully digging into piles of dyed eggs with unfeigned vigor, cracking the shells in interesting patterns and rolling the eggs in spices; deflowering piles of fruit, cut and arranged like blossoms; spearing little deep-fried objects with the ends of carved picks. He took a grape, for form's sake; it had come from a hothouse, and must be worth its weight in eggshells.

Across the table his compatriot caught his eye and smiled. In the few weeks Michael had been in Chartil, Devin had lost no opportunity to point out to him his deficiencies in local custom. Devin was the second son of a second son; an aristocrat by courtesy, whose lineage came nowhere near Michael's. In the city of his birth Devin felt it sharply; in Chartil he was exalted to the rank of ambassador, and his hospitality was legendary. His saving grace was a sense of humor, which took the sting out of his self-defensive maneuvers. Michael liked Devin; and he thought Devin had decided to like him, in spite of his background.

Above the racket of conversation, the ambassador said to him in their own tongue, "Packet came in today. Lots of gossip from town."

A servant was trying to refill one of Michael's three wine glasses. Michael gave up and let her. Her thigh rubbed against his shoulder. Automatically he turned his chin to nuzzle her waist, but his eye fell on the bangles around her ankles, and his head jerked back. She was a bonded slave. Devin's sardonic eyes glinted at him, reading his thoughts: of course no free woman here, not even a servant, would seek to entice him; that lot fell to those whose bodies and their issue were pledged to an owner. For women, it was a step up from prostitution. He wondered if he had been selected by his host to breed, or to be flattered. Either idea repelled him.

"She likes you," said the ambassador.

Michael hid the color of his face in his widest-brimmed wine cup.

"It's no worse," Devin persisted, "than one who takes your money and wishes you in hell. She'll get paid at the end of her term. More gracious this way."

"Nevertheless…" Lord Michael took refuge in an aristocrat's shrug. "What's the gossip?"

"Seems Lord Horn's been killed."

Michael forgot that he was holding a wine cup when his hand opened. He caught it on its way down before it hit the table, but not before its contents had liberally bestowed themselves on their surroundings. The slave mopped at it all with a napkin.

"Friend of yours?" Devin was enjoying himself mightily.

"Hardly. I just didn't think he was ready for death."

"Probably wasn't. They're saying a swordsman did it."

"Oh? Any idea which one?"

"*Swordsman?*" A Chartil noble on his left caught the word, and continued in his own tongue, "That's one of your laborers, isn't it, who dishonors his sword in the service of other men?"

Devin translated the comment for Michael, and chided the speaker, "Now, Eoni, if that were so, it would be dishonor to be a soldier."

"*Ffft.*" Eoni made the usual Chartil comment of disdain. "You know very well what I mean. For the killing of noble enemies, only two things will serve: either the challenge direct, or, saving your courtesy and that of the table, the certain use of poison. None of this pussy-footing around with surrogates. And I've served my time as a soldier and I'm proud of it, so don't think to gall me that way, you small-minded, round-faced foreign excuse for a gentleman!"

"'Insult, the last refuge of blighted affection…'" Devin quoted sweetly.

Barred by language from the conversation, Michael rolled a grape between his fingers and thought about Horn. Murdered, and he knew by whom. *His life is about to become complicated…*Yes, what was left of it. The clear eyes of the swordsman looked out from his memory, blue as spring hyacinths…self-serving little murderer, using his skill with a sword to destroy better men than he'd ever be…

"Excuse me." Michael nodded to his host, and set off in the direction of the urinals. But he didn't stop there; his will took him out onto the street, walking swiftly through the sun-baked alleys of the town. He passed enclosed gardens whose feather-topped trees showed over the walls.

It wasn't that he had any love for Horn. He would have killed Horn himself, if he could. But St Vier couldn't have any quarrel with Horn; no

one forced a swordsman to take a job he didn't want. No one had forced him to kill Vincent Applethorpe…Michael stopped for a moment, involuntarily pressing his hand to his mouth. He still dreamed about it, when he wasn't dreaming of wool.

That was what the duchess had wanted—not a swordsman, not a courtier, but someone to look into the direct shipping of wool from her estates to Chartil. She was eliminating the middleman by having the raw wool dyed and woven here into the popular shawls, then shipped back to sell out of her own warehouses…At first he'd thought this tradesman's assignment an elaborate and degrading joke. But on the ship, studying the records and notes she had given him, he came to see how much politics was bound up in business, and how much of his skill the task would require, especially in a place where no one knew him. There were laws, and import taxes to consider…It was the stuff of the Council meetings he always made sure to avoid, the hidden agenda of the grain reports from his father's land, which he glanced over grudgingly each month, whose revenues supported his life in the city.

The wool business had caught Michael up, intrigued him, even made him feel a certain power; but it had not made him forget Applethorpe. He would bear the death to the end of his days. And St Vier, whose skill had lured his Master into the endless night; St Vier, who at the end had seemed to share with his Master a spirit and understanding that Michael could not approach…St Vier had walked away and gone to wield his power elsewhere.

Michael looked down. A little man in a dirty headcloth was jabbering at him, asking him something. He shook his head helplessly: *I don't know.* Doggedly, the man repeated the question. Michael caught the words for "lord," and "buy." He shook his head again; but the man blocked his path, not letting him move on. Michael pulled back a fold of his robe, showing the sword he wore to threaten him. The little man grinned excitedly, nodding with great vigor and enthusiasm. He reached inside his own robe and pulled out a little vial; one, two, three of them, all different shapes, thrusting them under Michael's nose, gesticulating with his other hand:

"Four bits! Four times four—" or maybe it was four *and* four—"bits for one! All three, even less!"

Michael had spent time in the market. Still not sure what the product was, but amused despite himself, he employed the bulk of his vocabulary:

"Too much."

The man expressed shock. The man expressed dismay. Perhaps the lord did not fully understand the exceptional quality of his stock. He pointed to the vials, pantomimed drinking one, and clutched his throat, emitting realistic choking noises, reeling backwards as though looking for a resting place. He sat down hard on the ground, rolling up his eyes, then grinning happily at Michael.

They were poisons. Poisons for his enemy.

"Five!" the man said. "All three, five each!"

A death no one could stand against, swift and sure. It would not be impossible to arrange it for St Vier. Michael Godwin had friends in the city, and money.

Michael shuddered in the sunlight, remembering the swordsman's animal grace. It was a foul death to offer such a man; a worse death than he had given Applethorpe or Horn. However the Chartils might romanticize expedience, it remained a death without honor, unheralded and unchallenged. *The challenge…you either know it or you don't.*

Michael touched the sword he wore. He knew it; and for him it did not lie in feats of arms. He was a nobleman, and nobles did not seek revenge against swordsmen on commission. If anything, he should be plotting against Horn; but the nobleman had gone beyond Michael's revenge. He had no reason to want to avenge Horn, and for Applethorpe no vengeance would ever be enough. It was natural for him to want to hurt the man who had been the instrument of his first adult grief; natural, but not right. He was glad he had not even held one of the vials in his hand.

Michael's face told the little man that the bargaining was over. He drifted back around the corner, and Michael turned back toward Devin and the feast.

It was true, as the duchess had told him, that the Chartils respected a man who could use a sword. The friends he made who practiced with him were intrigued by some of his straight-point technique, and amused at his lack of experience; but one of them said seriously to him, "At least you are a man. Your countryman the feastmaster is a good sort, but…"

When he came back in the hall the eating was still going on, and there was a fourth wine cup at everyone's place. He found he was ready for it, and even managed some enthusiasm over almond tarts.

Devin looked at him as he sat down. The ambassador's face was grave, but his eyes glinted with dry mirth: "Get lost?" he said.

"Only temporarily." Michael bit into a cake.

chapter XXV

THE OLD FORT GUARDED THE MOUTH OF THE CHANNEL to the old city, on the east bank. It was still used as a watchtower, but now its honeycomb passages housed important state prisoners. St Vier had been brought there early this morning, and Lord Ferris had come as soon as the news reached him.

Half an hour in the Fort found Ferris trying hard not to lose his temper. Finally, he sat in the chair he had first been offered, spreading his cloak out not to wrinkle it. It was as comfortable a room as could be made of the heavy stone cells of the old fort. It was the deputy's sitting room, where visitors waited to be escorted to the prisoner of their choice. But it seemed that, in the case of Richard St Vier, they were reticent with the privilege.

When Lord Ferris sat, the deputy sat too, across the table from the nobleman. The deputy was a steady man, but having to match wills with a Council Lord made him uncomfortable and turned his virtues to stubbornness. Doggedly he repeated his information: "You will forgive me, my lord, but the orders I have come from the Crescent himself. St Vier is to be kept closely guarded, and no one is to see him without Lord Halliday's own express permission."

"I understand," Lord Ferris said for perhaps the third time, trying to make it sound freshly compassionate. "But you must realize that, as a member of the Inner Council, I comprise a portion of the Justiciary. All of us will be questioning St Vier as soon as my lord duke of Karleigh arrives in the city."

"In the court you will, yes, my lord. But I have no instructions as to private interviews beforehand."

"Oh, come." Ferris essayed a smile, willfully misreading him. "Surely the serpent is defanged, and I cannot be harmed now."

"Surely, my lord," the deputy agreed, with the formal tolerance reserved for aggravating superiors. "But *he* might be. We are guarding Master St Vier for his own protection as well as others'. In affairs of this sort, it is not always the swordsman who is the guilty party."

"What?" Ferris exclaimed. "Has he said anything?"

"Not one word, my lord. The gentleman—that is, the young man is most quiet and well behaved. He has not asked to see anyone."

"Interesting," said Ferris, in his role of chancellor, "and possibly indicative of something. But there, I mustn't ask questions of you before the actual Inquiry." He stood up briskly, shaking out the heavy folds of his cloak. "I expect you have also been required to inform Lord Halliday of any who come asking to see St Vier?" The man nodded. "Well, you needn't bother in my case," Ferris said heartily; "I'll go and call on him now myself, inform him of my breach of etiquette, and see if I can't procure that necessary bit of paper for you."

"Very good, my lord," the deputy said—or one of those noncommittal phrases implying measured credulity and the desire to be left in peace by the mighty.

Ferris hurried out of the chill of the Fort and into his waiting carriage, where he put his feet on a hot brick that could have been hotter. He did not drive to Lord Halliday's. He went home. He had no intention of letting Halliday know that he was interested in seeing St Vier. But he very much wanted to see the swordsman before he could tell Basil Halliday about the plan to have him killed.

There was no certainty that St Vier would tell about him, of course. It would not absolve the swordsman of Horn's murder. And, of course, there was not even the certainty that St Vier had ever known the identity of his

one-eyed contact. Nothing was certain; but Ferris wanted to control all the odds that he could. He had the best, the surest plan, if only he could implement it: to offer St Vier his protection in the matter of Horn's death, if St Vier would agree to carry through on the Halliday challenge as soon as he was freed. Taking the charge as patron of Horn's disgusting murder would not be good for Ferris, but he could think of some story to explain it, to subtly blacken St Vier's character and add yet another taint to Horn's; and it was convenient that St Vier kill Halliday. The debt would bind the swordsman to Ferris for life, and when he had been elected to the Crescent, Ferris would have much use for him.

As soon as Karleigh came up from his estates to sit on the Justiciary, they would try the swordsman. St Vier would see Ferris on the panel of justiciars, and could recognize him. Ferris didn't dare risk what the swordsman might try to do then to save his life. It was remotely possible that St Vier might think of the double blackmail on his own, but Ferris must find a way to let him know that he would cooperate in it.

But he could not get in to see him now without creating suspicion. He needed a proxy. Katherine had failed him once, when he sent her to Riverside. Now she must serve him again—for the last time, if all went well. Surely they would not deny St Vier's own *wife* permission to see him? It might work—nobody knew what sort of arcane pairings there were in Riverside, and she was a fetching piece.

A servant took Ferris's cloak; another was sent to bring him something hot to drink, and another to summon Katherine Blount.

The hot drink came, but Katherine did not. The footman said, "I sent one of the maids up to her room, my lord. It seems it is empty."

"Empty…? Of what? Of her person, or…?"

"Of her, ah, belongings, my lord. The girl appears to have fled. She was paid two weeks ago for the month. But she seems to be missing since night before last."

"Fled!" Ferris tapped his fingers on the cup rapidly, thinking. "Send Master Johns to me. I shall require some letters sent."

He had not meant to keep her much longer: she was the link that tied him to St Vier, should the matter be investigated. Perhaps he had been too hard on her, and she had simply run away, in which case he didn't care what happened to her. But if she had gone, say, to Halliday…

His letters dictated and secretary dismissed, Ferris realized, ruefully, that he must turn to Diane. The duchess's connections were better than his; she might even be able to get him access to St Vier. He would not tell her everything; that would be a great mistake. And a mistake to think that he could simply bend Diane to his will; that had once been tried, and quickly discarded. But he might be persuasive, if she was in the right mood for it… even now it was not good to lie to her, but she could be charmed. Once again Ferris called for his carriage to be sent round, and ordered the familiar route to the Duchess Tremontaine's.

He stood in the duchess's front hall, trying to hand his gloves to the footman, but the footman wouldn't take them.

"My lady is not in, my lord."

From upstairs Ferris heard her laughter, and a snatch of song.

"Grayson," he said slowly, "do you know me?"

"Of course he knows you," a new voice drawled from the shadows. "You're a very recognizable figure."

A young man of no more than twenty years was lounging against the side of the staircase, surveying Ferris with an expression that contrived to be both bored and amused at once. He was very beautifully dressed in deep red, and wore a collar of rubies. He held a book in one hand.

"If the duchess told Grayson to tell you she is not in," the young man continued, "it actually means that she doesn't want to see you. Is there a message?" he asked helpfully. "Perhaps I could take it."

He was tall, and fine-boned, theatrically languid in his motions. He turned and drifted partway up the stairs, stopping to look down at the Dragon Chancellor, the hand with the book resting on the rail. Ferris stared up at him, still saying nothing. Was this his replacement? Some young nobody—oh, very young—someone's son fresh from the country? A consolation after her loss of Michael Godwin, an insult to Ferris, a replacement…It was not possible that she was throwing him over. She had no cause. Her refusal to see him was some new game, or a trick of this smug young man's who might, after all, be some distant relation of Diane's…

"Is there any message, my lord?" Grayson asked, professionally deaf to the antics around him.

"Yes. Tell my lady I will call again."

"Who knows," the mocking voice drifted after Ferris as he left, his stride so swift that his cloak billowed out, brushing the man who held the door open for him, "she may be in."

And as the door closed behind him Ferris heard the duchess's laughter echoing in the marble hall.

Answers to the letters he had sent were waiting for him when he got home. No one had seen any sign of Katherine; or at least, no one was admitting to it. Perhaps she had gone back to Riverside where, in truth, she belonged.

He stood with his hands on his desk, leaning his weight on his arms. In another minute he would straighten, raise his head, and find another order to give. Before Diane, it had been like this, too often: a sense of his own power blocked; of not being taken seriously; of not being able to choose for himself the strongest course. He was Dragon Chancellor now. People knew him, admired him, looked to him for guidance, for advancement. Basil Halliday confided in him, and would help him if he could…Ferris started, hearing his own sharp laugh. Go to Halliday with his problems, like all the rest of them—tangle himself in that net of compassionate charm, and exchange Diane's dominion for Halliday's…that was not the way to the power he sought, cold and uncompromising, the terms his own and his alone. Most people were like Horn: they could be manipulated, rendered agreeable or untroublesome in their actions. Blocks like Halliday could be duped and got rid of. Ferris sighed, shaking his head. If only they all could be ignored. But of course that was unrealistic.

Ferris thought of the day that stretched ahead of him, and decided to emulate the duchess. Turning his back on his study, he ascended to his bedroom, where he wrapped himself in a heavy robe, had a large fire made up, settled next to it with a book and a bowl of nuts, and gave instructions that, to anyone who called, he was not in.

FOR RICHARD ST VIER, IMPRISONED, that day passed very slowly. He had a headache, and there was no one to talk to, and nothing very interesting to think about. Shrugging the day off as a loss, he made himself as comfortable as he could, and retired early to bed with the sun. The next morning brought news of his trial.

The pleasant young nobleman had already explained to Richard all that he needed to know about his coming questioning. The pleasant young nobleman, whose name was Christopher Nevilleson, had been sent expressly from Basil Halliday to do so the day he arrived in the Fort. Richard disliked the young man intensely. He knew there was no good reason for it, but he did. Lord Christopher had had the shackles struck from Richard's wrists and legs, and had expressed official dismay, tinged with personal horror, at the condition the Watch had left him in. But the bruises would heal in time, if there was time left to him. He was horribly stiff, but nothing was cracked or broken.

Halliday's aide was serious and fresh-faced. In him the Hill drawl sounded like a speech defect he had never grown out of. He told Richard that he would be questioned first in private by a collection of important lords, to determine how culpable he was in the killing of Lord Horn. They had to know whether he was working for any patron so they could then decide whether to try him in a Court of Honor or turn him over to the civil authorities as a murderer.

"There are so few laws that really cover the use of swordsmen," he explained. "If you have anything in writing it would be very useful."

Richard stared at him out of one swollen eye. "I don't work on contract," he said frostily. "They should know that by now."

"I…yes," Lord Christopher said. He told Richard that he would be required to answer questions under oath, and that depositions had already been sworn against him by witnesses. Richard asked, "Will I see any of these people at the trial?"

Lord Christopher answered, "No, that isn't necessary. They've already signed statements witnessed by two nobles." He kept saying, "You do understand, don't you?" Richard said that he did. Finally, the pleasant young nobleman went away.

Early this morning they had sent someone in to shave and barber him, because the Duke of Karleigh had driven in last night and now the Justiciary was complete. Richard had submitted to the combing fingers and the scissors, but when it came to the sharp-edged razor he asked if he might use it himself, and offered to go unshaven otherwise. In the end they let him shave himself, and stood solemnly around watching to make sure he didn't cut his throat.

It would be interesting to find out what the trial was like. In the past, when he had been hired to kill a lord the noble who hired him had always stood up in the Court of Honor for himself, so that St Vier need not appear at all. Part of his care in choosing his patrons had involved their ability to do so. The Court of Honor was a secret thing, presided over by the Inner Council. Swordsmen who had been called to it were never very clear in their descriptions after: either they had been confused, or they wanted to impress by being mysterious, or both. Richard suspected that the truth was seldom told in the Court of Honor: a noble's ability to manipulate it and his peers seemed to be the key to success there. That was why St Vier took only patrons who seemed to have that knack over men who offered him contracts where his "innocence" would be cast in writing—that, and his own desire for privacy.

He wished now that he had been a little more pleasant with Lord Christopher, and asked a few more questions. But it didn't matter: soon he would find all about the court for himself. He could think about that; could think about the future but not the past. He'd already gone over everything he'd done wrong; once was enough for that sort of thing, to satisfy his mind; any more was useless and unpleasant. If he lived, he could find out who in Riverside had sworn against him. The reason for Katherine's nervousness was clear now. But she wouldn't have done it on her own—somehow, they had made her afraid. He couldn't help her now.

Doggedly he stretched and paced in the small stone room. Whatever happened, there was no point in letting himself get stiffer. His bruised body protested, but he was used to ignoring it. The room was not terrible; there was light, and a bed bolted to the wall. His injuries and the inactivity made him feel tired; but the temptation of the hard bed was resistible.

He paused by the window, leaning on the stone embrasure. It was a privilege, of sorts, not to be thrown in the Chop with the common city criminals. Richard was in one of the upper rooms of the Old Fort, looking out over the mouth of the channel guarding the oldest section of the city.

Far below, the river glittered, grey and bright as the surface of a mirror. His window was an arrow slit, tapering to an opening in the outer wall. The cold stone felt good against his forehead. The tide was running; he watched trade boats passing down to the channel.

Habit made him clap his hand to his side when he heard the door opening behind him. He did not bother trying to convert the gesture when his fingers closed on nothing.

"Master St Vier." The deputy of the Fort stood just within the doorway, backed by a phalanx of guards. "Your escort is here to conduct you to the Council Hall."

He was surprised at the respect they accorded him. He didn't know if it was just the formal good manners extended to all Fort prisoners, or if his being a well-known swordsman outweighed his living in Riverside.

"Is there a crowd?" he asked the deputy.

"A crowd? Where?"

"Outside, in Justice Place," Richard said, "waiting to see us go by." He had assumed that the guards were to keep the curious from pressing in on them on their walk across the plaza. There would be friends there, and enemies; hordes of curious gogglers with nothing better to do than shove and stare.

"Oh, no." The deputy smiled. "We don't go that way." He read St Vier's look. "The guards are for you. My lord would not have you chained, so we need a convoy to prevent your escaping."

Richard laughed. He supposed he could injure the deputy, and maybe capture one of the guards' weapons. He could turn their orderly walk into a slaughter. But the chances were bad, and he had an appointment with the Council.

They came to a stair, and picked up more torches. Their way led downward, underground smelling of stony water and iron earth. It was a passage system under the plaza, connecting the Fort with the hall.

"I never heard of this!" Richard said to the deputy. "How long has it been here?"

"Well before my time," the deputy answered. "I've memorized the passage. It's part of my duties. There are a lot of dead ends and unexplored turns."

"I'll try not to wander off," Richard said.

"Do that." The deputy chuckled. "You're sure of yourself, aren't you?"

Richard shrugged. "Isn't everyone?"

The stairs leading up weren't as long as the ones they had taken down. The guards had to pass single file through the door at the top, with Richard

between them. They came into a hall filled with sunlight. Richard's eyes burned, and he felt himself drenched in the fire of day, saturated with the colors of the wood-paneled walls, the marble floors, and the painted ceiling. The sun-baked warmth of the hall, with its high windows, was welcome to them all after the chill of the passage. But the disciplined guards were silent as they marched their prisoner down the corridor.

They came at last to large oak double doors, guarded by liveried men who opened them portentously. Richard was expecting something splendid; instead there was another antechamber, more doors. These, too, were opened, and he and his escort paraded into the Court of Honor.

The room was dim, as though drenched in perpetual afternoon. He had an impression of maybe a dozen men in splendid robes like theater costumes, seated behind a long table facing him. He was given a chair in the middle of the floor, facing Basil Halliday and some others. Halliday wore blue velvet, with a huge ring stitched in gold on the chest: emblem of the Crescent whose chancellorship he held. Richard thought wryly what a wonderful target the circle made. But that job was off for now.

"Master St Vier." The irritatingly nice young man who had briefed him now came forward. "These are the lords justiciar, fully assembled in Inquiry before us. They have already heard all the signed depositions; now they will ask you some questions."

"I do understand," said Richard. "But isn't one missing?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said, *fully assembled*. But there are two empty seats: yours and one next to that red-face—next to that man in green."

"Oh." For a moment, Lord Christopher looked flummoxed. He hadn't prepared to answer questions from the accused in front of everyone. But Basil Halliday smiled and nodded to him; so, taking heart, he said, "That is the seat for Tremontaine. Next to my lord duke of Karleigh. Every ducal house has the right to sit on the Court of Honor—"

"But the damned woman won't take her duties seriously!" roared the red-faced man who had been pointed out as the Duke of Karleigh. Although he'd taken the duke's job and his money, Richard had never seen him in person before. Karleigh seemed like the type to require swordsmen frequently: proud and quarrelsome, as well as powerful. "Didn't take long to

get *her* the message, I'll warrant! *She* didn't have to come tearing up from the hinterlands on a day's notice for this…"

"Now, my lord." A man with a bird emblem stitched on his chest tried to calm the duke. "That is between the duchess and her honor, not ours." Richard recognized Lord Montague, a man he'd worked for and liked. Montague was Raven Chancellor now, and less given to fights; Richard had been wounded once in his service, and taken into Montague's own house to recover.

When the Duke of Karleigh had been settled, Lord Halliday began the questions. "Master St Vier, we have heard many people swear that you killed Lord Horn. But no one witnessed the event. References are all to your style, your skill, to rumor. If you can summon proof positive that you were elsewhere on the night of his death, we would like to hear of it."

"No," said Richard, "I can't. It *is* my style."

"And is there someone you think might copy that style to get you into trouble?"

"No one I can think of."

"—*my lord*," Karleigh injected. "Damned insolence. *No one I can think of, my lord*—mind how you speak to your betters!"

"And you mind," a quiet voice said lazily, "how you make a shambles of these proceedings, Karleigh." The florid duke fell silent, and Richard could guess why: the speaker was a man of average build, perhaps as old as Karleigh, but with flexible hands that were younger, more capable, and eyes that were much older. ("Lord Arlen," Chris Nevilleson mouthed at him.)

"I'm sorry," Richard said to the Crescent. "I haven't meant to be rude."

He'd noticed that Halliday had been ignoring Karleigh's outbursts; of course, there was trouble between them. Halliday shrugged and said to the Raven Chancellor, "See that that exchange is struck from the notes, my lord?"

Montague jotted something down and motioned to the scribe behind him. "Of course."

"You understand, then," Halliday said to Richard, "that all evidence points to you?"

"I meant it to," Richard said. "That was its purpose."

"You do not deny that you killed Horn?"

"I do not."

Even in the small group, the noise of reaction was loud. Finally, Lord Halliday had to call for silence. "Now," Halliday said to Richard, "we come to the particular business of this court. Can you name a patron in Horn's death?"

"No, I can't. I'm sorry."

"Can you give us any *reason*?" Montague leaned forward to ask.

Richard thought, framing his answer in words they might understand. "It was a matter of honor."

"Well, yes, but *whose*?"

"Mine," Richard said.

Halliday sighed loudly and wiped his forehead. "Master St Vier: your firmness to stand by your word is known and respected in this court. Any patron you select must have complete faith in you, and I'm sure this one does. But if he is too cowardly to reveal himself and stand the judgment of his peers, I want to make it clear to you that your life is at peril here. Without a noble patron, we will have to give you over to a civil authority to try you as a murderer."

"I understand," said Richard. A thought with the voice of Alec whispered silently: My honor isn't worth your attention. But secretly he was relieved. They honestly didn't seem to know why he had had to kill Horn. Since Godwin had escaped his challenge, Horn had not been eager to boast about the blackmailing of St Vier. So far, only Riverside knew anything about that. And Richard would do what he could to see that it stayed that way. He didn't think it would even matter if he did tell them the reason; it probably wouldn't stand up under their contorted rules. The court was turning out to be interesting only in an eerily nasty way: like their rationales for killing each other, there was a separate set of rules that seemed to double back on itself, whose origins they'd long ago forgotten the purpose of.

"Might I ask a question?" said a new voice, faintly familiar. Richard looked at the speaker, and found why: a man with coal-black hair and an eye patch had risen. He, too, was in blue velvet, and there was a nice-looking dragon on his chest. It was Ferris, who'd come from the duchess to ask him to kill Halliday.

"Master St Vier." Lord Ferris courteously introduced himself: "I am the Dragon Chancellor of the Council of Lords. I, too, have heard in many

places just how well you may be trusted…in many places, sir." He had his head turned so that his good eye was fixed on Richard; his speaking eye. Richard nodded, to show he understood the reference to their meeting.

"Speechmaking, my lord Dragon?" asked the Duke of Karleigh in a low but carrying voice.

Ferris smiled warmly at him. "If you like. It's what comes of being a good boy and waiting my turn." The other nobles laughed, breaking the tension and letting him continue: "And I think, Master St Vier, that in view of your reputation we are perhaps doing you a disservice. For your style bespeaks not only a man of honor, but a man of sense. If you did kill Lord Horn, you did so for a reason. It may be a reason we all wish to hear. The death of a noble concerns all of our honors, whether in formal challenge or no." Down the table, Halliday nodded. "Now, the civil court has been known to use methods less gentle than our own…"

The old-young nobleman asked dryly, "Are you proposing that we torture St Vier, Ferris?"

Lord Ferris turned his head to look at him. "My lord of Arlen," he said pleasantly, "I am not. But, in fact, it's not a bad idea. Something formal, and harmless, to keep his honor intact."

Richard felt as though he were fencing blindfolded. Words were deceiving; one had to move by tone and inference, and by sheer sense of purpose. Remembering Ferris's style in the tavern, Richard thought the lord was saying that he knew what had happened with Horn. If so, he was threatening to reveal it…unless what? Unless Richard assured him that he would not reveal the plot against Halliday? But how could he assure him in front of them all?

"Ferris," Halliday interrupted, "Arlen; I must ask you to be serious. Do you really want that proposal put on record?"

"I beg your pardon," Ferris said a little haughtily. "I think it should be considered before we give St Vier over to death at the hands of the civil court. I realize that such a proposal would draw this Inquiry out—longer, perhaps, than some would care to spend on it. But I would like it noted that my own hand is held out to the swordsman as willing to entertain any answer he gives us here. In the privacy of this court, any nobleman's honor is secure, and his reasons may remain his own. I cannot give St Vier that assurance. But I will answer whatever else he asks."

There was the message, as clear as it could be: Whatever they can do to me is nothing compared to what they'll do to you. Use me. But Ferris would not come forward and claim Horn's death himself. He wanted Richard to name him before them all, and destroy the swordsman's own credit with the nobles of the land. If he did it, Richard would be forced to turn to Ferris for patronage. The Halliday job, it seemed, was still on.

Richard sat and thought, and for once no one got up to make a speech. He could hear the scribes' rough scratching. Ferris was promising him immunity, protection, and privacy in the matter of Horn. It was as much as he could hope for. But it was only Horn's game all over again: save Alec's life or save his own; show he couldn't protect what was his or show that he could be bought with the right coin. Still, Ferris had made the offer; his hand was "held out to the swordsman." If Richard refused to take it Ferris might see that the law descended heavily on him, if only to secure his silence. The idea of honorable torture was ingenious—though too sweet and rich, like one of their banquet prodigies, the spun-sugar cage with the marzipan bird inside. Whatever he chose, they had him: there was no more to hope for.

Richard stood up. "The swordsman thanks you," he said. "May I ask the noble court one question?"

"Certainly."

"My noble lords; I would—"

But his words were lost in the sudden commotion from the antechamber. Shouts, the clang of metal, and the scuffle of feet echoed between the two oaken doors. All attention left Richard, as startled birds leave a washline. Halliday nodded to Chris Nevilleson, who unlatched the door to the room.

The guards were holding on to a richly dressed man, trying to keep him from entering. He appeared to want to enter on all fours, since he seemed to be not so much trying to escape them as trying to hit the floor. When the door opened his captors jerked him upright. Green eyes stared across the room at the Crescent Chancellor.

"I've dropped it," the intruder said.

Richard kicked over his heavy chair for a diversion. Sure enough, someone shouted, and in the ruckus he could reach Alec, disarm one of the

guards and get them both out of there…Then he realized that Alec hadn't even looked at him. Alec was still talking to Lord Halliday.

"I don't know what you feed them, but they're awfully nervous, aren't they? An excitable job, I suppose."

Two more guards had appeared to right Richard's chair and sit him in it. He craned his neck, enraptured, staring at the young nobleman in the doorway. Alec's hair was cut and washed so that it fell in a soft cap around his head. He wore green brocade and gold, and it looked just as splendid on him as Richard had always known it would. He was even contriving not to slouch, probably because he was so angry that he had gone all stiff and straight and precise.

"If they weren't so eager to turn everyone they meet into rice pudding, I wouldn't have dropped it, and then perhaps we could have avoided all this."

Lord Christopher darted forward and picked up the object in question, a gold medallion on a chain.

"Oh, hello," said Alec. "Nevilleson. I pushed your sister in the fish-pond once. How is she?"

Lord Christopher looked up into his face and gasped. "Campion! They —I thought you were dead!"

"Well, I'm not," said Alec. "Not yet, anyway. May I have that, please?"

Halliday nodded, and the guards released him.

"See?" Alec came forward, holding out the medallion. "Tremontaine. It's my signet. And my pass. The duchess sent me. May I sit down?"

The entire room was staring at him as he walked to the empty seat between Lord Arlen and the Duke of Karleigh. He nodded courteously to the scribes, and introduced himself, "Lord David Alexander Tielman (I, E, one L) Campion, of Campion and Tremontaine." He waved one hand airily. "It's all in the heralds' books, you can look it up later."

Even Richard could see the fierce look Lord Ferris was giving the newcomer. He thought, If Ferris recognizes Alec from Riverside, there could be trouble. But Alec only caught the look and smiled at Ferris with a private, malicious joy. Then he addressed the assembled nobles. "I am so sorry to be late. It was very exasperating: no one seemed to be willing to tell me where you were meeting. You really should leave instructions about these things. I've seen more of the Hall of Justice than anyone should have

to. It's quite tired me out. I hope it will be lunchtime soon. And now, shall we get down to business, my lords?"

They were all staring at him now, even Basil Halliday. Only Lord Arlen seemed to be amused. Arlen said, "You will want to read the notes first, Lord David. I'm afraid we have started without you."

Alec looked at him with the wind, as they say, momentarily knocked out of his sails. Richard's opinion of the unknown nobleman went up several more notches. He was still too stunned to do much more than take in Alec's performance. So Alec was a relative of the pretty woman with the swan boat after all. The admirable duchess with the wonderful chocolate set had sent her young kinsman to his trial. Maybe *Alec*—or, as it seemed, *Lord David*—was going to claim to be the patron in Horn's death? It wasn't completely wrong. The thought of the elegant young noble with the blistering tongue and terrible manners acting as his patron made Richard feel slightly cold. A lot of Alec's outrageous behavior was due to simple fear and some embarrassment. Whatever he was planning to do here, Richard hoped he could pull it off. He had silenced Ferris for now, anyway.

Alec finished reading the notes, and put them down with a brisk nod. The reading seemed to have given him the time he needed to regain his nerves. "I have several things to add," he said, "and not all of them are suitable to this Inquiry. Tremontaine has been dealt several offenses in this case, and would like to see them brought before the entire Council of Lords. I can't be more specific now without prejudicing the case. Also, as some of you know"—here he looked mildly at Lord Christopher—"I'm interested in old books. Some of them actually contain some useful facts. In one I've found an old legal custom called the threefold challenge. It has never been officially rescinded, although it has fallen out of use. I know observance of the old ways is very much respected by some gentlemen"—and the look he gave Lord Karleigh was less mild—"and hope that by bringing St Vier into the hall before all the assembled lords of the state, we could require his patron to come forward by crying it three times."

"It sounds very dramatic," said Halliday. "Are you sure it will really be effective?"

Alec shrugged. "It will, as you say, be good theater. And you wouldn't want to punish the wrong man."

"But," said Lord Montague gently, "can we summon the entire lordship of the city to a piece of good theater?"

Alec's chin lifted dangerously. "You must be joking. They'd *pay* to see this. Two royals a head, and standing room only. Make 'em vote up the land tax while they're all in there. All card parties will be canceled."

Basil Halliday nearly disgraced his position by chuckling helplessly. "He's right."

"And that," said Karleigh, glad to have something to disagree with at last, "is what you think of the dignity of the Council, my lord?"

But in the end, the vote was passed.

chapter XXVI

TWO DAYS LATER, the deputy of the Fort was getting tired of being beaten at checkers.

"Beginner's luck," said Richard St Vier. "And anyway, we're not playing for real stakes. Come on, just one more game."

"No," the deputy sighed, "I'd better go and find out who wants to see you this time. Don't these people understand, orders are orders, they don't change from hour to hour. But I'll tell you, I could retire to the country with the bribes I'm offered."

"I'm fashionable," Richard said; "it happens."

The cell was full of flowers, like their box at the theater. The gifts of food and wine had to be refused as possibly poisoned, but the clean shirts, bouquets, and handkerchiefs were checked for secret messages and then

gratefully accepted. It might be in poor taste to make a hero of St Vier with Lord Horn barely cold in his grave; but the nobles of the city had always been intrigued by the swordsman. Now popular feeling was that Horn's real killer, Richard's patron, would soon be uncovered at the impending Council. Even Horn's empty house was fashionable; people drove past it several times, looking for the wall St Vier had climbed over and the room where It had happened. And young David Campion, the instigator of the exciting proceedings, was very much sought after at the Duchess Tremontaine's—but he was never in.

ALEC SPENT MUCH OF HIS DAYS LYING ON HIS BACK in a darkened room, sleeping. The duchess sent up trays of exquisite food at regular hours, which he roused himself to eat. She would not allow him nearly enough wine. At night he prowled the house, haunting the library and reading things at random, scribbling notes and throwing them away. He came across an early copy of the banned *On the Causes of Nature*, and read it through twice without taking in a word it said. The only thing that kept him from dashing back to Riverside was the fact that Richard was not there.

NOR WAS THE DUCHESS AT HOME TO LORD FERRIS. His letters to her were received, but not answered. Once, he met her in a public place where he knew she would be. She was charming but not flirtatious. Her eyes and words contained none of her usual doubles entendres, and she answered his own blandly. He wanted to scream at her, to beat her, to close his fingers on her flower-stalk neck; but there were people present, he dared not begin a quarrel for no apparent reason. Her delicate features and clear skin drove him to a frenzy he had not known in many months with her. He wanted to stroke the tight satin over her ribcage, to rest his hands in the curve of her waist and pull her featherlight body to him. He felt like a poor man looking through a park gate, helpless and unrelievedly unhappy. *He* knew what he had done to offend her; but he did not see how *she* could possibly have learned of it. Even if she had, he could not continue to live with her begrudging him his independence. He had been her willing apprentice for three years now. She had taught him love, and politics. Through her he had become what he was. And he had served her well, advancing her views in

Council while she sat at the center of the city, a delicate hostess everyone adored who everyone knew had no interest in politics…

He couldn't remember how she had cast off the one before him. Her love affairs were discreet. The city was full of her friends; some of them, perhaps, old pupils who had left her more gracefully. He had been so sure that Godwin was targeted to be the next one. It had suited Ferris to assist Horn's little folly, to chase him away. If he had been right about her interest in Godwin, then she might well be angry now—although a lesser woman would be flattered at his jealousy. But how did she *know?* She was playing with him. Should he have come to her with an accusation? Waited to be given his marching orders? It occurred to him now that perhaps he had just been given them: not because of Godwin, but because of this young kinsman of hers, the brash young man with the high cheekbones. He looked Lord David up in the Heralds' List and his eyes widened. The bonds of blood were too close, surely. But nothing was sure with the duchess.

Lord Ferris tried through intermediaries to get word to St Vier; but his agents were all turned away, and finally he had to give up lest his interest become known. For some purpose of her own, Diane was sending in her young kinsman to champion St Vier's cause. He had been sure, at the Inquiry, that St Vier had grasped his meaning, and had been about to answer him affirmatively—but then Tremontaine had interfered. He wished he knew what Diane's game was. The simplest explanation was that she wanted St Vier for herself. But Ferris was not ready to abandon his own purpose. Without Diane's support, his bid for the Crescent would be more difficult, but still not impossible. If St Vier had truly understood him, he would have his chance again in open Council to acquire the swordsman's full cooperation. Why, after all, should St Vier listen to Tremontaine's young emissary, who was obviously using St Vier for his house's own ends? Ferris could promise him freedom, patronage, and work. David Alexander Campion was offering St Vier nothing that Ferris could see.

IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, which had once been the Hall of Princes, a festive chaos reigned. Every noble in the city who had the right to sit in Council was sitting today—or standing, or milling, leaning on benches to talk to friends two rows over, or calling their servants to fetch another bag of oranges. The mingled scents of oranges and chocolate overlaid the hall's

usual ones of waxed woodwork, ceiling dust, and human vanity. The Council was beginning early this morning, and men unused to going without their breakfast were not about to give it up.

The Lords Halliday, Ferris, Montague, Arlen, and the other members of the Justiciary panel were not partaking of the general merriment, or its sustenance. They sat at a table on a dais at the head of the hall with the paneled wall behind them. The Inner Council chancellors wore their blue robes, and Arlen and the Duke of Karleigh were richly dressed for public viewing. Of Lord David Campion there was as yet no sign.

Halliday looked out over the milling throng. "Do you suppose," he murmured to Ferris, "that we could get them to pass an act or two while they're all here?"

"No," Ferris answered flatly. "But you're welcome to try."

"Where's Tremontaine got to?"

"You don't imagine," Montague said, "that he's got lost again?"

"Probably." Halliday glanced out at the crowd of nobles. "Better get started anyway, before they begin having orange fights." He leaned across to his aide. "Chris, tell the heralds to call for silence, and then go and tell the deputy we're ready for St Vier."

Richard and the deputy of the Fort were waiting patiently in an overcrowded antechamber stuffed with guards.

"I'm telling you," the deputy was saying to his charge, "you never saw a set of knives like that foreigner had, each one long as your forearm, and balanced like God's judgment—"

Then the huge double doors swung open like shutters on the confining chamber, revealing a world of immense magnificence: a hall whose ceiling reached up to four times a man's height, studded with tall windows letting in sunlight that gilded the expanse of carved wood above and tilework below. The deputy dusted off his knees, and Richard straightened his jacket before they passed through those portals.

Closer up, Richard had a dazzling impression of ancient oak and freshly gilded scrollwork; and of a vertical sea of faces, bobbing and roaring just like real waves, but multi-colored, as though struck to rainbows by the sunlight. He sorted it out into three banks of seats, filled with nobles, and on the fourth side a raised table behind which were seated the men from the Inquiry. Alec was missing. But Alec would be there; must be there. Richard

wondered if he would be wearing the green and gold again. Now that he was allied with the Duchess Tremontaine, it was fitting that he look the part. Richard pictured the clever duchess giving Alec the kind of look she had given *him* at the theater, long and appraising and amused, perhaps saying in her aristocratic purr, "So, you're seeing sense and giving up on poverty at last. How convenient. I have a use for you…" But just what that use was, Richard couldn't begin to fathom. Perhaps she was simply confirming Alec's return to the fold in sending him to Council. Obviously, there'd been some rift with Ferris; maybe she'd decided not to kill Basil Halliday after all, and sent Alec to stop it. Richard assumed that, with the duchess behind him, Alec could save his life as efficiently as Ferris could, and at less cost to himself. He didn't think that Alec would want to hurt him.

They gave Richard a chair facing the panel of justiciars. Their interest was all on him: Halliday's look gravely considering; Ferris's cool; the Duke of Karleigh frankly staring. Lord Montague raised his eyebrows at Richard, grinned, and mouthed the words, "Nice shirt." Behind Richard the stands were noisy with comment. He really didn't like having his back to so many strangers. But he watched the faces of his judges like mirrors for what was going on behind him. Halliday's betrayed irritation; he gestured, and heralds began pounding for silence.

Slowly the ruckus died with a hissing of "Shhh!" and one clear, "They're getting started!" At last the room was as quiet as one so full of living souls could be. Feet shifted, benches creaked, cloth rustled, but human voices were stilled to a soothing murmur. And in that silence one pair of footsteps rang on the tiles.

From the far end of the hall a tall figure in black made its way across the expanse of floor. As it drew nearer, Richard's breath caught in his throat. Alec's customary black was all of velvet this time. His buttons glittered jet. The snowy edges of his shirt were trimmed with silver lace. And, to Richard's utter amazement, a diamond glittered in one ear.

Alec's face was pale, as though he hadn't slept. As he passed Richard's chair he did not look at him. He went up to the dais, and took his seat among the justiciars.

The duchess had advised her kinsman of the precise time to arrive. He had badly wanted not to be approached before the Council began, and not

to have to talk to any of the other justiciars when he sat at the table. His seat was between Lord Arlen and the Duke of Karleigh, on the other side of the Crescent Chancellor from Lord Ferris.

The muttering in the stands was rumbling its way to thunder again. Quickly the heralds called for silence, and the questioning began.

Reading from notes, Lord Halliday repeated his questions from the other day, and Richard repeated his answers. At one point someone from the stands called out, "Louder! We can't all hear!"

"I'm not an actor," Richard said. He was snappish because they were making him feel like one. He almost expected Alec to make a crack about throwing flowers; but it was Halliday who told him,

"Move your chair back a few paces; the sound will spread."

He did it, and felt the high ceiling somehow picking up and projecting his words through the chamber. These people thought of everything.

Finally, Lord Halliday addressed the Council: "My noble lords: you have heard the Justiciary question the swordsman Richard, called St Vier, in the matter of the death of Asper Lindley, late Lord Horn. That he did conspire in that death and succeed in it is now beyond question. But the honor of a noble house is a fine matter, and not touched on lightly. We thank you all for your attendance in this hall today, and charge you silence in the attendant threefold question."

He looked over to Lord Arlen, who leaned back in his high-backed chair. Through the relaxation of Arlen's gesture a terrible focus burned; and the hall, feeling it, was still. Arlen lifted his head, and the deep gaze of his old-young eyes seemed to touch all the sides of the chamber, from the solemn men in front to the young men wrangling excitedly in a corner where they thought they would not be noticed.

Arlen's voice was dry and clear. It carried to the ears of everyone. "By the authority of this Council, and of the Justiciary that presides for it, and by the honor of every man here, I charge any man bearing title of the land, whose father bore it and who wishes his sons to bear it, to stand forth now and proclaim himself if his honor or the honor of his house was touched to the death by Asper Lindley, late Lord Horn."

The first time he heard the question Richard felt a chill down his spine. There was not a sound to be heard in the hall, and the world on the other side of the windows had ceased to exist. When Arlen repeated the

question, Richard heard shuffling, as though people were preparing to rise, though no one did. Arlen waited for silence before repeating it a third time. Richard closed his eyes, and his hands closed on the arms of his chair to keep himself from answering the challenge. It was not his honor these people were concerned about. And in the doom-filled silence, no one stood forth.

"Master St Vier." Richard opened his eyes. Basil Halliday was speaking to him in a quiet orator's voice that everyone could hear. "Let me ask you one last time. Do you lay claim to any patron in the death of Lord Horn?"

Richard looked over at Lord Ferris. Ferris was looking at him in mute urgency, the lines of his face rigid with veiled frustration. It was a stifled command, and Richard didn't like it. He turned his eyes to Alec. Alec was gazing out over his head with an expression of abstract boredom.

"I do not," Richard answered.

"Very well." Halliday's voice broke Arlen's spell, decisive and normal. "Has anyone anything further to add?"

As if on cue, Alec stood up. "I do, of course."

A long sigh seemed to issue from the corporate mouth. Alec raised his hand. "With your permission," he said to the others; and when they nodded, he went down the steps to Richard.

As the figure in black approached, Richard saw Alec's hand reach into the breast of his jacket. He saw the flash of metal, and saw his own death at the end of the fine blade wielded by the man in black velvet. His hand shot up to turn the knife.

"Jumpy," said Alec, "aren't we?" He held out the gold Tremontaine medallion, and, still a few feet away, tossed it to Richard. "Tell me," Alec drawled; "and while you're at it, say it loud enough for everyone to hear, have you seen this particular object before?"

Richard turned it over. It had been in Ferris's hand, in Riverside, the night they'd spoken at Rosalie's. Ferris had shown it to him to dispel his doubts about going along with the unnamed job. The job which had proved to be the killing of Halliday. The job Alec hadn't wanted him to take. To identify the medallion and its purpose now meant pointing the finger at Tremontaine, in front of Halliday himself.

"Are you sure—" he began; but Alec's voice overrode his: "My dear soul; I've heard a lot of scandalous things about you, but no one ever told me you

were deaf."

Or it meant pointing the finger at Ferris. Tremontaine and Ferris had fallen out. Tremontaine would deny all complicity in the Halliday job. Or perhaps…perhaps there had never been any in the first place.

"Yes," Richard said. "I've seen it."

"You amaze me. Where?"

The tone of Alec's voice, the showiness of his antagonism, were hopelessly reminiscent of the first time they'd met. Then, his foolish daring and bitter wit had attracted Richard. He knew Alec better now, well enough to recognize his fear and desperation. Alec had come close enough for Richard to smell the steely smell of freshly ironed linen, the citron he'd been barbered with, and, under them, the sharpness of his sweat. Its familiarity made him feel suddenly dizzy; and to his dismay it streaked his senses with desire for the nobleman in black. He dared to look up into Alec's eyes; but, as ever, Alec looked past him.

"I was shown this—the Tremontaine medallion—a few months ago, in Riverside. By someone…by an agent of Tremontaine." Richard did not look at Ferris.

"An agent of Tremontaine?" Alec repeated. "Re-ally? Are you sure it wasn't just someone trying to sell you stolen goods?"

He thought, Re-ally, Alec! But that was probably what the nobles believed Riverside was like. "He came about a job for me," Richard answered.

"Was he a regular agent, one you recognized?"

"No. I'd never seen him before."

"Would you know him if you saw him again?"

"Not necessarily," Richard said blandly. "I only saw him the once. And he seemed to be in disguise."

"Oh, did he? A disguise?" He could hear the pleasure in Alec's voice. It felt as if they were fighting a demonstration match, the kind the crowds liked, with lots of feint and flash. "What kind of disguise? A mask?" They both knew what was coming, and it forged the first bond of complicity between them that day.

"An eye patch," Richard said. "Over his left eye."

"An eye patch," Alec repeated loudly. "Tremontaine's agent had an eye patch."

"But then," Richard added sweetly, "so many people do."

"Yes," Alec agreed, "they do. It's hardly enough to convict anyone of falsely claiming to represent Tremontaine in a matter of honor, is it, my lords?" He turned to the Justiciary. "Nevertheless, let's try. May I have the Justiciary's permission to call as witness Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris and Dragon Chancellor of the realm?"

No one had any trouble hearing Alec. But the hall remained desperately quiet this time.

Ferris rose smoothly and slowly, like oiled machinery. He came down the stairs and stood next to Alec, in front of Richard. "Well, Master St Vier," he said; just that. "Well?"

He was trying to make Richard afraid. Richard felt something mad about the chancellor, even more intense and furious than Alec at his worst. It was as though Lord Ferris did not yet believe he had been beaten, and at the same time believed it so much that he was willing to do anything to deny it.

"My lord," Richard said gently to Alec—and this time Alec could not make him take back the title—"you must ask me what you want to ask me."

Alec said, "Is this the man you spoke to in Riverside?"

"Yes," Richard answered.

Alec turned to Ferris. Alec's body was so stiff with tension that he couldn't tremble. His voice had changed: formal, dreamy, as though he were caught himself in the ritual of accusation and justice. "My lord Ferris, Tremontaine charges you with falseness. Do you deny it?"

Ferris's good eye was turned to look at the young man. "False to Tremontaine?" His mouth thinned in a sour smile. "I do not deny it. I do not deny meeting the honorable St Vier in Riverside. I do not deny showing him the Tremontaine signet. But surely, my lords," he said, his voice growing stronger with assurance as he faced the line of his peers, "any of you can think of another reason for me to have done so."

Richard's mouth opened, and then closed. Ferris meant that he had come to him to have Diane killed.

Alec said it for him: "St Vier doesn't *do* weddings."

The familiar phrase broke some of the tension in the room: "No weddings, no women, no demonstration fights…" Montague rehearsed ruefully.

"Very well," Alec said directly to Ferris, his voice ringing with restrained excitement. "And if he refused the job, which he surely did, why then did you twice send your servant, Katherine Blount, to negotiate with him?"

Ferris's breath hissed sharply through his nose. So that was where she'd gone—to Diane, her rival in his bed. The slut had no pride. But that must be it—how else would Tremontaine know about her meetings with St Vier? Knew it, then; but couldn't prove that *he* knew it.

"My servant." Ferris forced himself to sound surprised. "I see. Then I fear Tremontaine has been misled. Mistress Katherine is herself Riverside-born. I took her into my service to keep her out of prison. I had no idea she was holding to her old ways, her old friends…"

"Just a minute," said Richard St Vier. "If you mean she is my lover, she is not. You should know that very well, my lord."

"Whatever she is," Ferris said coldly, "does not concern me. Unless you intend to produce my servant here before this Council to testify that she was running messages from me, I'm afraid we'll have to let the matter rest."

"*What about the ruby*?" Alec spoke to Ferris so quietly that even Richard could barely hear him. But the old note of mockery was back in his voice.

"Ah," Ferris began, in stentorian tones for the public. "Yes. The stolen __"

"It's mine," Alec murmured. With an actor's grace and timing he opened his hand, holding it low between his body and Ferris's. The ruby ring blazed on his finger. "Always has been, always will be. I recognized it at once when Richard brought it home." Ferris was staring into his face. "Yes," Alec continued in an insinuating purr, "you're awfully dim, aren't you? I even wore black especially so you'd make the connection. But I suppose you can't really be expected to see things as clearly as the rest of us…"

The insult struck home; Ferris clenched his fist. Richard wondered how he was supposed to keep Ferris from killing Alec here in Council.

"My lord…?" Basil Halliday's voice tried to recall the drama to the public sphere; but Ferris stood frozen by the sudden double vision of the young man before him as he had been the night of the fireworks, dashing up the Riverside tavern stairs.

They say he's got a tongue on him to peel the paint off a wall. Richard says he used to be a scholar.

Thank you, Katherine. *I've seen him. He's very tall.*

Tall, and much more handsome than he'd been with hair straggling in his face—dressed in black, to be sure: the black rags of a student, then. Ferris remembered asking about the swordsman and being told by a chortling taverner, "Oh, it's St Vier's scholar you'll want to apply to, sir. He's the one knows where he is these days." And Ferris had watched Alec go past him out of the door, noted the bones…but he never would have connected that ragged man with the honey-and-acid creature who'd insulted him at Diane's house.

It was not Katherine who had informed the duchess, then, but her own kinsman. With his information Diane would have pieced together everything Ferris had done, and intended to do. Ferris wanted to laugh at his own stupidity. He had been watching her right hand these last few days, the hand that held his affections, wondering like a jealous husband why she was casting him off; while all the time it was her left hand that held the key to his future, his plots, and his mind.

Diane had discovered his treachery, and from her lover and student it was unacceptable. Basil Halliday was her darling, the cherished heart of her political hopes for the city. She had already hired the swordsman Lynch to fight one of Karleigh's in Halliday's defense, and succeeded in scaring Karleigh off. She would not forgive Ferris for trying to dispose of his political rival. For Ferris to have pretended that the orders were coming from her was doubly damnable.

He hadn't meant to do it. He'd thought he could convince St Vier to work for him on his own merits. But when the swordsman had proved recalcitrant, Ferris had remembered the Tremontaine signet resting in his pocket, lent by the duchess that night for an entirely different purpose. It had seemed the height of cleverness to show it to St Vier. He remembered thinking that if, someday, St Vier was called to trial for the killing of Halliday, the evidence would point back to Tremontaine, and the duchess, finally, would be forced to set foot in the Council Hall herself to defend her house before Ferris, the new Crescent Chancellor…

Once he'd begun the charade with the signet, giving St Vier the Tremontaine ruby as well had seemed too good an opportunity to miss. Diane had tossed it to him one day with a joke about pawning it; she didn't seem to expect it back. It was Ferris's passion for detail, his love of dupes

and of complexity, and his belief in his own power to control everyone, that had tripped him up.

Now he was caught on the gilded curlicues of his own plots. If he had left Godwin alone, if he had left Horn alone, St Vier might never have come before the Council; and Alec might never have returned to the Hill for help for his lover.

Well, he could still take the blame for Horn's death—it was just that he do so, after all. That would be what they wanted, the duchess and her boy. Lord David wanted to save his lover's life. And Diane wanted her lover ruined. She possessed the means to do it. The duchess had seen to it that a considerable crowd was assembled to watch: every lord in the city was there today. If Ferris refused to act to save St Vier, Tremontaine would reveal the Halliday plot before them all.

"WELL, MY LORD?" Tremontaine's voice spoke clearly for all to hear. "And shall we have to let the matter rest? For you are quite right; I am not holding your servant up my sleeve, waiting to testify against you."

There came to Ferris then one of the moments he treasured. He felt himself standing at the pinnacle of the past and future, knowing his actions would rule them both. And it seemed quite clear to him then that he must take control, and how. He would ruin himself by his own will, his own power, in front of the eyes all perfectly focused on him.

Lord Ferris turned, so that his back was neither to the Justiciary, nor to the mass of men who waited on his words. He addressed Tremontaine, but his words were for all of them, delivered in that carrying orator's voice which had so often swayed the Council. "My lord, you need pull nothing from your sleeve. You shame me, sir, as I hoped never to be shamed in my life; and yet, for the sake of justice I must speak. You may say that I am willing to sell my honor to keep my honor; but to trade honor for justice, that I can never do."

"Interesting," said Alec conversationally, "though it follows no rules of rhetoric known to man. Do go on."

Correctly assuming that no one else had heard that little commentary, Ferris proceeded. "My lords; let the justice be yours, and let the honor be Master St Vier's." Richard felt himself redden with embarrassment. For Lord Ferris to make a show of himself was his business; but Richard had no

taste for theatrics. “Before you all, I here freely confess that I did falsely represent myself to St Vier in Tremontaine’s name, and it was through my agency that Horn met his death.”

And that, Ferris thought complacently, was not even a lie.

Basil Halliday was staring at him in disbelief. All of the justiciars were frozen, silent, calculating, looking at the one from their midst who had stepped onto the floor and broken himself. But the stands were another matter. The nobles of the land were shouting, arguing, comparing notes and comments.

Over the cover of their noise, Halliday said to him, “Tony, what are you doing!”

And, riding the crest of his pure manipulation, Ferris found the delicious nerve to look him gravely in the eye and say, “I wish it weren’t true; I wish it with all my heart.” He meant it.

“Call for silence, Basil,” said Lord Arlen, “or there’ll be no stopping them.” The heralds pounded and shouted, and eventually some order was attained.

“My lord Ferris,” said Halliday heavily. “You take responsibility for the challenge of Lord Horn. It is a matter for the Court of Honor, and may be dealt with there.”

But that would not serve Ferris, although the duchess might be pleased to have him swept away under the rug. For his purposes his downfall must be spectacular; something to be remembered with awe…something to be returned from in glory. So Ferris held up his hand, a deprecating gesture that made his palm burn as though he held their living spirits in it. Of course they would all listen to him. He had been their prodigy, the bright young man of courage and charm. He had seen to it that they were ready to follow him: he could have had the Crescent for the asking. It would take longer now; but by his very act of abnegation he was already working his way back into their hearts.

“My lords,” he addressed the hall. “The council of my peers, the noble lords of this land, is court of honor enough to me. I freely grant that I deserve chastisement at your hands, and do not shrink from the weight of their justice. But I believe that which fated my ill deeds to be revealed before you all has also fated me with the small gift of letting you hear my reasons, the ‘cause of honor’ that impelled me to the deed, here, from my

own lips." The gallery stirred with interest. This was what they had come for, after all: the drama, the passion, the violence; the making and unmaking of reputations in one morning. Almost as an aside, but pitched for all to hear, Ferris pointed out, "In matters of honor, the wise man fears his friends' censure far less than he does their conjecture." There was a ripple of approving laughter at the epigram.

The justiciars muttered amongst themselves, deciding whether to concede the unusual request. Only Alec was worried: Richard knew that look of utter disdain and what it signified. Apparently a speech by Ferris was not on Tremontaine's agenda. But there was not much Alec could do about it, only stand there letting haughtiness mask his nerves. Richard couldn't take his eyes from him, slender and brittle and poised. All that which, in Riverside, coming from a shabby, long-haired academic reject, had inspired men to homicidal rage, was fit and meet in this elegant creature's world—refined almost to a parody, but still within the range of normal. The nobles wouldn't love him for it, but they would accept him in their midst. It was where he belonged, after all. Richard tried to picture Alec as he was now, back in their rooms in Riverside—and felt his stomach clench with an emotion he thought best to disregard. He pulled his eyes away from the secrets of Alec's comportment and back to Lord Ferris.

The chancellor had bowed his sleek head; but his squared shoulders spoke gallantry and a noble determination. Whether from his posture or the pure curiosity his plea invoked, Ferris got what he wanted. In the pause in proceedings while the Justiciary made its decision to let him speak, Ferris had been working out the details of his story; now he launched into it in a new key, not humble but fierce with the desperation of a man given one last chance to clear his name of calumny; yet tinged with the resignation of one who knows he's done wrong.

"My lords," he began again, striding into the center of the floor. "As you know, in matters of honor some explanation is owed amongst ourselves. I give it to you all now, tardily and with some shame. The clear-eyed among you will already have guessed the reason: I called for the death of Asper Lindley, and then hid that fact, to prevent a surge of rumor in which the innocent might suffer. I pray that you will regard it now as I did then—as rumor only; as the malice, maybe, of an aging—" His voice rising, Ferris stopped and passed a hand over his face. "Forgive me. This is not the place

to re-fight the challenge. Suffice it to say that I had come to believe that Lord Horn attempted to dishonor a kinsman of my mother's. In his cups, Asper spoke disrespectfully of my kinsman's wife, and even began to claim that the man's son resembled him more than he did his own father. The boy —the young man, I should say, since he was almost twenty-five—was in the city at the time, and I feared…what every man fears in such a case. The truth is, he *did* resemble Asper, in looks and…other ways."

Ferris paused, as though collecting himself. The hall was stone silent. But he knew each man was going over the roster of slender, fair young men recently in the city. He might have been too obvious already; surely he had provided enough detail to label Michael Godwin as Horn's bastard, forever, in some people's minds. For all he knew, it might even be true. And there it was, his parting gift to Diane; a taint set deep on the man she had dared consider to replace him. Let her work her delicate stratagems on that!

Lord David, oddly enough, was smiling as though amused. Ferris looked at him out of the corner of his eye, and was suddenly pierced with the awful thought that he'd got it wrong—that Tremontaine was not really who he said he was; she had deceived him one last time and was taking this awkward beauty to her bed—but it was too late to change his story now. He reined his fancy in sharply. It was his misfortune to be a jealous man. He must not let it get in the way of his next step, the performance he still had to give.

He turned to face the Justiciary, giving his left shoulder to the young man, not to see his face. "My lords," he said in a low but carrying voice, one of his specialties, "I hope that the honor of the court will be satisfied with this. If—"

"Honor may be satisfied," Lord David drawled in interruption, "but Tremontaine is not. If we could dispense with honeyed rhetoric for a moment, I would like to point out that you lied to St Vier, and have tried to defame your servant's name in court to hide it."

Ferris smiled to himself. A young egalitarian. This court didn't care how he used his servants; the boy had been in Riverside too long. If he was Diane's latest choice, she would have a job teaching him patience in statecraft; anyone could see that he *cared* about things too much. St Vier, on the other hand, sat like calm itself, betraying only an intelligent interest. Ferris was sorry to lose him. He had such perfect balance.

"I beg Tremontaine's pardon," Ferris said gravely. "I am not unaware that I have acted shamefully. Other restitution is for the Justiciary to require. As for the rest…" A gasp went round when they saw what he was doing. The blue velvet robe, richly embroidered with the chancellor's dragon of the Inner Council, hung loose now on his shoulders. With careful formality he undid the last buttons, and slid the robe of office from his body. Lord Ferris folded it carefully, keeping it from the floor. He stood before them all dressed in stockings, breeches, and a white shirt whose full sleeves and high neck covered as much as the robe had, but to much less effect. Alec had the effrontery to stare.

In a cold and terrible way, Ferris was enjoying himself. It was all politics, after all. With every act of poignant humility, he drew his public closer to him. When he was down so low that he had nowhere else to go, they would be merciful. And of their mercy he would build his fortune.

Deeply he thanked them for permission to resign his office. Courteously he signed the depositions of his testimony. And humbly he stood in the shadow of the Justiciary dais from which he had fallen, while his recent colleagues recessed to decide his fate.

The nobles in the stands were all moving amongst themselves. They were sending out for oranges again. No one came near Ferris and St Vier, marooned in the center of the floor. At last Ferris motioned to a clerk to fetch him a chair. St Vier was paying no attention. His friend had departed with the other justiciars.

It hardly mattered whether they believed Ferris's story or not. They were none of them anxious to punish St Vier, only to fix the blame for Horn's death. With a noble patron standing up in court, all blame shifted from St Vier's shoulders—he emerged a hero, true to his patron's faith even unto death. Of course all swordsmen were crazy. People liked them that way. It had been risky for Ferris to insist on being heard in open Council: someone might easily have brought up the mauling of Horn. But they had respected his humility, or been distracted by it, and no one did.

Expectant murmurs in the stands told Ferris that the Justiciary was returning through the double doors. He waited a long moment before turning his head to look at them. One by one the men took their seats again, their solemn faces telling him nothing. Would they still make an example of him? Had they somehow seen through his pretense? Or were

they only suffering from the trauma of his divestiture? Ferris's fingers dug into his palm; he concentrated on keeping them still. His last image must be of meeting his fate with grace.

It was Arlen who spoke, not Halliday. Ferris kept his gaze averted from the still pool of the other man's eyes: he had known them to make men blush before. Arlen spoke of financial restitution to Horn's estate, published apology to Tremontaine…Ferris tried to fight the growing lightness of his heart. Could it be all? Could he still hold Halliday's love and trust? The fool, he thought, the fool…and set his face in lines of deep concern. It was a physical effort to keep it so when Arlen finished; as hard, in its way, as lifting rocks or climbing stairs not to break out in a grin of relief.

Before the silence attending Arlen's sentence could be broken, Lord Halliday said, "This is the restitution the Council of Honor sees fit to demand. Let it be so noted. I speak now for the Council of Lords, of whose Inner Council you are late a member. We do not forget the services you have rendered there, or your skill in dispatching them. Although your current position now makes it impossible for you to continue to serve there, it would please the Council to accept your service to the realm in another sphere. To that end we propose your appointment as Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the free nation of Arkenvelt."

Ferris had to bite his lip to keep from laughing aloud—not, this time, in relief. But hysterical laughter was not the correct public response to crushing defeat. Arkenvelt! The journey was six weeks by sea, or three months overland; he would be far from the borders of his realm. The news would be two months' stale, his work useless and dull.

It was banishment, then, and they knew him at last. Banishment to a frozen desert of tribal anarchists who happened to control half the world's wealth in silver and fur. The port city, seat of all major commerce, was a giant international fishing village whose houses were carved into the very earth. He would sleep on a pile of priceless furs, and wake to chip a hunk of frozen bear meat from the carcass by the door. His work would be interceding between commercial interests, helping lost captains find their way home…counseling the policies of merchants and of miners. The most he could hope for was to line his pockets with local riches while he waited to be recalled. He could not know when that would be.

"My lord of Ferris, do you accept the position?"

What more could they do to him? What more could *she* do to him? He knew the law; he had Diane to thank for that. But then he had Diane to thank for everything.

He heard his own voice, as if at the end of a tunnel, rattling off the right phrases of gratitude. It was not an ungenerous offer: the chance to redeem himself in a position of responsibility which would, in time, lead to others. If he behaved himself, it would not be long. And they would forget, in time… So Ferris told himself. But it was hard not to give way to laughter, or shouting, to tell them what he thought of them all as they watched his dignified bow and straight back, all those eyes following his slow walk across the echoing floor and out of the door of the chamber of the Council of Lords.

chapter XXVII

IT SEEMED THAT THE NOBLES OF THE CITY wanted to congratulate Richard St Vier. They wanted to apologize to him. They wanted him to admire their clothes, they wanted to take him to lunch. He was going to hit someone, he knew he was going to hit someone if they didn't back off, stop clustering so close around him trying to touch him, get his attention.

The deputy of the Fort appeared at his elbow. Richard followed the path his men cleared out of the chamber, into the little waiting room. There a voice he knew said, "Surely you didn't think they'd just let you walk away?"

He was thirsty, and every bruise in his body ached. He said, "Why not?"

"They adore you," said Alec, sounding horribly like himself. "They want you to have sex with their daughters. But you have a previous engagement with Tremontaine."

"I want to go home."

"Tremontaine wishes to express its gratitude. There's a carriage waiting outside. I've just spent a fortune in bribes to secure the path. Come on."

It was the same painted carriage he remembered handing the duchess into, that day at the theater. The inside was cushioned in cream-colored velvet that felt like it had a layer of goose down under it. Richard leaned back and shut his eyes. There was a gentle jolt as the carriage began to move. It was going to be a long trip; the Council buildings were far south and across the river from the Hill. They couldn't be planning to drop him off in Riverside, the streets wouldn't accommodate a carriage this size.

He heard a rustle of paper. Alec was offering him his pick of a squashed parcel of sticky buns. "They're all I could get." Richard ate one, and then he ate another. And another somehow disappeared, although he didn't remember taking it, but he did feel less hungry. Alec was still poking around in the creases of the paper looking for dropped bits of icing. Despite the splendor of his black velvet he didn't seem to have a handkerchief, and Richard had lost his somewhere in prison.

"There'll be champagne up at the house," Alec said. "But I'm not sure I dare. I haven't been drunk in days; I think I've lost my head for it."

Richard leaned his head back and shut his eyes again, hoping to go to sleep. He must have dozed, because he didn't have any coherent thoughts, and sooner than he expected they had stopped and a footman was opening the door.

"Tremontaine House," said Alec, stepping down after him. "Excuse me, please, I"—he glanced warily at an upper window—"I have a pressing engagement."

It had, apparently, all been foreseen and arranged. Richard was led, alone, to the kind of room he remembered from his own days of playing on the Hill. There was a very hot bath, which he stayed in for less time than he'd have wished, because he didn't like the servants hovering around him. They left him to dress himself. He put on a heavy white shirt, and fell asleep across the dream-soft covers of the bed.

The door opening woke him. It was a tray of cold supper, which he was privileged to eat alone. He set the tray on a little table by the window, overlooking the landscaped grounds and lawns rolling down to the water's edge. The sun struck the river to burnished brass; it was late afternoon. He was almost free to go.

Servants always made him uncomfortable, especially the well-trained ones. They seemed to be trying to act not like people but like self-effacing automatons that just happened to breathe and have speech. Everyone was always very polite to them, but the nobles were adept at ignoring their presence, and he never could do that. He was always aware of the other person there, the unpredictable body and the curious mind.

The Duchess Tremontaine's people were among the best. They treated him with courteous deference, as though they'd been told that he was someone powerful and important. Keeping just far enough in front of him, they escorted him down halls and staircases to his interview with his benefactor.

He didn't know what he should expect, so he tried very hard to expect nothing. He couldn't help wondering if Alec would be there. He thought he would like to see Alec again, one last time, now that his head was clearer. He wanted to tell him that he liked the new clothes. In the duchess's house it seemed less surprising that Alec was a Tremontaine, as he walked through the ornate corridors whose overcareful display seemed to mock their own opulence.

The duchess's sitting room was so ornate that it confused the eye. It was cluttered with intriguing possessions of diverse shapes and colors, all caught up and reflected in the enormous convex mirror hung over the fireplace. On a chair in front of the fire, a woman sat sewing.

Richard saw the fox-colored hair, and turned to leave. But the door had been shut behind him. Katherine Blount stumbled to her feet, dropping her sewing. "My lady—" she said softly, her throat constricted with fear, "my lady should be here—"

"Never mind," Richard said, still standing by the door. "I expect I was brought to the wrong room."

"Richard," she said, nervously rushing her words, "you must understand —I was told you wouldn't be hurt."

"You can't disarm a swordsman without hurting him," he said calmly. "But I'm fine now. Can I open the door myself, or am I supposed to knock and let a servant do it?"

"You're supposed to sit down," she snapped; "sit down and *look* at me!"

"Why?" he asked politely.

She gripped the back of the chair for strength. "Don't you even care?" she demanded. "Don't you even want to know how it happened?"

"Not anymore," he said. "I don't think it matters."

"It matters," she said fiercely. "It matters that Lord Ferris pushed me too far—that I came here to my lady—that *she* sent me down after you. I didn't want to, but I trust my lady. She's been better to me than Lord Ferris ever was. She didn't want to hurt me, and she didn't want to hurt you. But Ferris wanted you to kill Lord Halliday. If you'd done it it would have bound you to him. We *had* to get you out of Riverside, to stand trial before the Council so that my lady could clear you and set Ferris up to be punished in your stead."

"What did she have against Ferris? And does she expect me to work for her now?"

Katherine stared at the overly self-possessed man standing across the room. "Don't you know? Alec is here."

"Oh, I know he's here. He was at the trial." He looked at her. "You should be careful of how you let yourself be used, Kath. Once you let them start, they'll go on doing it."

"It's not like that—"

"Why not? Because she's nice to you, makes it worth your while? Look, I'm all right—but I wish you hadn't done it."

"Oh, shut up, Richard!" He realized with dismay that she was crying. "I thought I'd never have to see you again!"

"Kathy…" he said helplessly, but made no move to comfort her. Her nose was red, and she was dabbing her eyes with the backs of her wrists. "I don't owe you anything," she sniffled. "Except an apology—well, you have that. I'm sorry I can't be a tough little Riversider. I'm sorry I let people use me. I'm sorry you got beaten up and it was my fault—now will you please go away and leave me alone!"

He did turn to the door, but it opened and a woman in grey silk came in.

"Katherine, dearest!" said the Duchess Tremontaine. "You made my dear Kathy cry," she scolded Richard, sweeping past him to take the woman

in her arms and let her tears stain the silk. The duchess offered her a snow-white square of lawn to use. "Never mind it," the lady said soothingly to them both. "It's all right now."

He realized that the duchess had meant for them to meet this way. Richard stared at the elegant lady busily comforting his friend, and kept his frank gaze on her even when she looked up at him.

"Master St Vier," she said, as though nothing had happened, while Katherine continued to sob on her breast; "welcome. And thank you. I know what you had to do to save—Alec's—life from Horn, and what it must have cost you. And I know you cannot be altogether pleased with my letting Lord Ferris take the credit. You have compromised your position twice to my benefit. I cannot think of any repayment for all this that would be less than ingratitude."

If she was expecting him to thank her in return, she would have to wait for it. Katherine blew her nose on the pristine handkerchief.

"But," the duchess said, "I would like you to have something. A memento only." From between her breasts she drew a chain. On it hung a ruby ring.

"That's Alec's," he said aloud.

She smiled. "No. This one is set in yellow gold, you see? His is white. They are a matched set of twelve, culled from the disbanded ducal coronet. Valuable, and highly recognizable. It would be hard to sell; but it makes a pretty toy, don't you think?" She dangled the chain, setting the jewel spinning.

"You're very generous." He made no move to take it. "Would you be good enough to give it to Lord David as a"—what was the word she'd used? —"memento from me? I think he'll have more use for it."

The duchess nodded, and slipped the chain back into her bodice. "Gallant." She smiled. "What a noble you would make. It's a pity your father was…but no one knows who your father was, do they?"

"My mother always claimed not to remember what she called insignificant details." It was an old story; it had made the rounds on the Hill once already.

"Well, then, Master St Vier, I will not keep you any more. I wish you godspeed," she said with quaint, old-fashioned grace, "in all your endeavors."

Richard bowed to both ladies. He followed the servants out of the room and down the corridors he had already memorized coming in.

It was blue dusk in the city. He had his sword back, and a bundle of his old clothes, washed and pressed for him by Diane's staff. The new suit he was wearing, he realized now, was peacock blue—Hypochondriac's Veins, Alec had called it. It fit Richard perfectly; but then, Alec knew the tailor who had his measurements. The cloth didn't look so gaudy out of doors. Now that he was popular with the lords again, he could wear it to their parties. He quickened his step, breathing in deep draughts of freedom in the evening air.

ALEC FOUND THE TWO WOMEN STILL SITTING together in the duchess's parlor. He burst in without knocking, announcing, "He's not in his room. The servants said he might be with you."

"Oh," said the duchess sweetly, her calm only mildly disturbed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know you wanted me to keep him particularly for you to see, so I let him leave."

"Leave?" The young man stared at her as though she were speaking gibberish. "How could he have left?"

"I believe he wanted to go home, dear. It is getting dark, and it's a long walk down."

For the first time, Katherine felt sorry for Alec. She'd never seen his face with that raw and defenseless look, and hoped she never would again. "Oh," he said finally. His face closed like a cabinet drawer. "Is that it. I see."

"It's for the best," Diane said. "Your father's getting old. He'll need help with the estate soon."

"He wouldn't notice if the sows started farrowing two-headed calfs," Alec said conversationally. "And don't say my mother needs someone to wind yarn for her, either. She is in the prime of domination." Katherine hiccupped a helpless giggle. Alec's eye fixed on her. "What's the matter with her?" he demanded. "Why are her eyes red? She's been crying—You let her see Richard, didn't you? You promised she wouldn't have to, and then you—"

"David, please," the duchess said wearily. "I was delayed upstairs, and he came too early."

Alec stared at her, his face white with anger. "There was no point to that," he said to her. "None. You did it to amuse yourself."

Katherine's flesh prickled. In Riverside, there would have been a fight. But the duchess turned, still smiling. "You're a fine one to talk, my dear. Don't you do most things to amuse yourself?"

Alec flinched. "It amused you to go to University," she went on pleasantly, "because it gave your parents hysterics. You liked that, you told me so."

"But that's not why—"

"Oh, you could have thought of something else well enough. But that served."

"You sent me the money. I wasn't of age; I hadn't any of my own." Alec's flat voice tried vainly to match her insouciance. "I didn't know which you wanted more—for me to spy on the University people for you, or just to upset my mother."

"Well, you refused to spy for me, so I suppose it must have been to upset your mother. I don't like her very much. I told her she was throwing herself away on Raymond Campion, but she wouldn't listen to me. She thought she was getting a hero, but she ended up with an aging cartographer with no dinner conversation. It has made her very unpleasant. I always could get a rise out of her through you. It's not as if I couldn't *afford* to support you. And there wasn't much she could do if I wanted to let her eldest study and drug himself with a lot of cowherds."

"They weren't—" Alec carefully unclenched his hands.

The duchess made a dismissive gesture. "There's no need to justify any of it: they amused you, and that's quite enough. You see, already you know more about the perquisites of power than most who have it; and when the time comes you'll be able to use your knowledge. They amused you: and when they ceased to do so you abandoned them for other…pleasures."

He must have done the same thing to other people hundreds of times: but here he was walking right into her trap, his emotions utterly engaged; reacting with the pain and fury of a man who's been kicked in his soft spot, no longer aiming his blows or planning his strategy.

"You're wrong," Alec said, his voice gruffly musical like an angry cat's. "They were kicked out—for having ideas no one else had, no one else could even understand—all stripped of their robes but me. The school didn't ask

me to leave. I suppose no one wanted to *offend* you. I suppose it *amused* you to keep me there."

"You amused yourself, my dear. It wouldn't have been much fun for you to go home to mother, and you wouldn't come up here to me. So you chose to stay; because there were still the drugs, and the people who didn't know who you really were to argue with."

"Can't you shut up about the drugs? They're on the Hill too, you know. But we *did* something with them, we made notes—"

"Was that your dangerous research?" she laughed. "The revelations of drugged sixteen-year-olds? No wonder no one took you seriously!"

"The stars!" he shouted. "Light! Did you know light moves? The stars, the planets are a measurable distance away. They're fixed, they don't move; *we* move. It's provable mathematically—"

"David," she said softly, "you're shouting. Lord," she sighed, "I really don't see what the fuss is all about. It makes no difference to me what the stars do with themselves."

"Politics," he said flatly. "Just like here. It went contrary to the ranking professors' findings, and they couldn't have that."

The duchess nodded approval. "Politics. You should have stayed there. You would have learned a lot."

"I didn't *want* to learn that!"

His voice rang in the gilded reaches of the cornices. The duchess shrugged her shoulders as though shaking off a gossamer scarf. "Oh, David, David…use some sense. You already have. What do you think you've been playing at in Riverside? Politics of the crudest nature: the politics of force. And you enjoy it, my dear. But you're capable of more. What about Lord Ferris? You convicted him admirably."

"It wasn't…fun."

"Mmm," she nodded. "More amusing when you get to watch them die when you're through with them."

He picked up a green glass paperweight, tossed it from palm to palm. "That disgusts you, does it?"

"Not at all. It's just the kind of charming eccentricity society looks for in a duke. Put down that paperweight, David, I don't want you breaking it."

"You're mad," he said. The edges of his lips were white. "I'm not even your heir."

"I'm about to name my heir," the duchess replied with a hint of steel; "and I'm not mad. I know you, and what you're capable of. I know it to a hair's fineness. I must parcel out the power that will succeed me; no one person can hold it all. You should be pleased; your part is one of the easiest, and you'll get all the money."

"I am not going to be duke," he said stiffly. "Even if you died tomorrow. Or right now," he added; "that would be fine with me."

"Don't be so quick to reject the dukedom, Davey. Wouldn't you like some real power, for once? You could build a library, even found your own University, independent of the city's. You could hire Richard St Vier to protect you."

He turned as though he would have hit her if he'd ever learned how to. His eyes were hot, like molten emeralds, in his white face. "Halliday," he managed to say; "your hope for the city. Make *him* your heir."

"No, no. He has his place already." She rose on a burst of angry energy, strode across the room in a hissing of skirts. "Oh, David, *look* at yourself! You were born to be a prince—you were a prince in Riverside, you shall be so again! I've seen you do it. Just look at the men who love and follow Halliday—and look at the one who loved and followed you."

"And then there's Ferris," Alec said acidly, "who loved you and followed Halliday, with a detour to Arkenvelt."

"Very clever," she answered. "Very nicely reasoned. You should be this clever all the time. It would have spared your Richard a good deal of trouble if you'd been clever enough to tell Horn who you really were when he was stupid enough to abduct you."

"Maybe," said Alec. "But I was hoping to avoid something like this."

"Avoid it?" she said, scorn showing on her face. "Is that all you want—to avoid things? Do you think the world exists to provide a playground for your whimsies?"

He looked blandly at her. "Well, doesn't it? I thought you'd just been telling me to amuse myself."

The duchess's knowing smile was strained. "Ah, so that's what you want to hear, my young idealist. Power for the good of the people; power to effect change; great responsibility and great burdens, which must be shouldered by those with the brains and the skill to use them. I thought you knew all that, and didn't want to hear it."

"I don't," said Alec. "I've told you what I think. I don't want any part in it. I don't know why you think I'm a liar. Even Richard doesn't think I'm a liar. Richard doesn't like to be used, and neither do I."

"And I, too," the duchess said icily, all warmth gone from her, "do not like to be used. You came to me because I could be helpful. You never could have saved him on your own. But my dear child, you can't just turn around and go back now. Surely you knew the risk when you took it. You've lost him. You let Tremontaine use him for its purposes today. He's a proud man, and a clever one. He knows what you did."

He was trying to see past the net she was folding him in, and failing, by the pallor of his face and the dullness of his eyes. But even in his weakness, he had managed to anger her past the point where she should be. And because she was a mistress of men's weakness, of frailty, of uncertainty, she twisted truth around him like a decoy.

"I was going to spare you this," she said stiffly. "I don't want to hurt you —I thought you'd see reason on your own. But come here."

Drawn by compulsion to the scent of danger, he came. She drew out the second ruby from her bodice. "Do you see this? I offered it to him with my thanks. But he threw it back in my face. He knows exactly how we used him, you and I. He didn't want it. He told me to give it to you—as a parting gift. He's through with you, David—Alec. So you see, there's no way out."

"Oh, don't be silly," said Alec. "There's always a way out."

He turned from her and walked to the full-length window; and when his hand shattered the glass he kept on walking a few steps more, then stopped. He stood at the center of a storm of broken glass. Shivers of it lay across his shoulders, rising and falling and winking in the light of his slow, ragged breath. His outstretched arm was flowing with blood. He was looking clinically at it.

The Duchess Tremontaine stood, too, watching the wreck of a man through the wreck of her picture window. Then she said, "Katherine. Please see that Lord David does not die before he leaves here."

She turned, and the grey silk whispered that the duchess was leaving, leaving to tend to some other piece of business that required her attention in the house, the city, the world.

She left Lord David Alexander Tielman Campion alone with his bleeding arm and a servingwoman who was ferociously and methodically

tearing her petticoat to strips for him.

Finally the blood's flow abated. The cuts had been many, but not deep. "The funny thing is," Alec told Katherine conversationally, "I can't feel anything."

"You will later," she said to him. "When you get home, soak all the glass out. He did give the ring back, but he still wants you. I'm sorry I waited so long to tell you. It's going to hurt plenty, believe me."

"You're upset," he said. "It's a good thing you left Riverside. Don't ever go back."

"I won't," she said.

"And *do* remember to let grandmama bully you. She's perfectly charming as long as you let her."

"Yes—Alec, leave now, before she comes back."

"I will," he said, and pocketed some silver ornaments.

chapter XXVIII

By the time Richard got back to Riverside, word of his release had spread through the district. Already a few of his possessions had been returned; he found them lying piled like offerings in front of his door: a small rug, the dragon candlesticks, and the rosewood box with a few coins in it. He stuck his candle stub in one of the sticks and went inside. The rooms were not much disturbed: some furniture had been shoved around, and a cushion he'd never liked was gone. He wandered the rooms, bathing in the familiarity of shape and shadow. He lifted clothes out of the chest,

folded and put them back; puffed up pillows and rearranged his knives. There was very little of Alec left in the house, and he was glad. His circuit ended on the chaise longue. It had been almost a year since he'd sat on it regularly. He stretched out, with his ankles over the edge, and fell asleep.

When he awoke, Richard thought he was dreaming. A tall man in elegant clothes was shutting the door behind him.

"Hello," said Alec. "I've brought us some fish."

THE WARM SPRING NIGHT CURLS ITSELF SILENTLY around Riverside like a sleepy cat. One by one the stars come out in the clear sky, twinkling cheerily over whatever mischief is brewing below them in the twists of streets and houses there tonight. Under their gaze the chimneys rise up in jagged argument, cold and still and picturesque.

From the celestial heights the arbitrary acts of life seem patterned like a fairy-tale landscape, populated by charming and eccentric figures. The glittering observers require vital doses of joy and pain, sudden reversals of fortune, dire portents, and untimely deaths. Life itself proceeds in its unpredictable infinite patterns—so unlike the measured dance of stars—until, for the satisfaction of their entertainment, the watchers choose a point at which to stop.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This novel would not exist in its present form without the help of more people than I can name on one page. However, I would like particularly to thank

Isabel Davidson Swift for listening and ironing;

Linda Post, Caroline Stevermer, and the rest of You Guys for believing I could do it before I did (or putting on a convincing act);

The Kushner "Medici" Foundation for Assistance to Struggling Artists;

David G. Hartwell for waiting till I came 'round again;

Tom Canty for the jeweled box;

…and Mimi Panitch for unplugging the telephone and inventing Writer's Stew.

Ellen Kushner
New York City
1989

Oh, the follies of the young! Elegant and cryptic, yes, but so inadequate is the above. It may take more than one page, but let me also acknowledge the great gifts that *Swordspoint* received in its nativity from my agent, the inimitable Julie Fallowfield of Macintosh & Otis, who loved the book and believed in it and me when nobody else dared to…from Joy Chute, my college writing teacher, who first took me on because, she said, she liked the way I rewrote, and nearly ten years later was kind enough read this in manuscript and assure me that it wasn't ridiculous to take so long to write such a book.

Jim Frenkel was the one who first explained to me that all those short stories I was writing actually wanted to be a novel, and Joan Vinge encouraged me to try it. Eve Sweetser and Alex Madonik patiently awaited installments. Fred Smoler paced up and down his cramped living room, waving a cigarette while expounding on the politics of villains for me. Tappan King said it might be radical, but do it anyway. David Fielder and Jane Johnson shepherded me into the glorious company of Unwin authors, publishing the book first in Britain. David Hartwell was the only editor in America with the nerve to take it on, and has been its fervent champion ever since.

My editor at Bantam, Anne Groell, has been immensely patient as I insist, like James Thurber with *The Thirteen* Clocks, on "tinkering with clocks and running up and down secret stairs" until the last possible minute; and my current agent, Christopher Schelling, has been a friend and advocate of Richard & Alec's for more years than either of us can quite believe. Finally, *Swordspoint* has encountered many kind friends over the years—bookstore people, reviewers, readers of many lands—but none more wise and understanding than Delia Sherman, who long ago bought a first edition, and now walks freely in the City, sharing the author's fortunes there and everywhere that fact and fancy take us.

Ellen Kushner
Boston
2002

AFTERWORD

to the Second Edition

I resolved never to write a sequel to *Swordspoint*.

Right after this book first appeared in 1987 and readers began asking "What happens next?" my standard answer was, "Oh, there's a diphtheria epidemic the following year, wipes out half the city. They're all dead. The End."

Silly me. I was afraid of a lot then, especially of What People Might Think. Would I look like I was repeating myself? Or copying other writers or trying to be too commercial…?

I missed them, though. I missed my city, which was, after all, made up of my favorite bits and pieces of every other city I'd walked in or read about: Shakespeare's London, Georgette Heyer's Paris, Damon Runyon's New York, for starters—and the New York I was living in then, where former students could still live in cheap apartments of decayed splendor near Columbia University, sharing a block with criminals and artists and immigrants and scholars.

And I missed my mad, bad boys. *Just once,* I thought, *won't do any harm…* I'll write about them right after the novel's end, but I won't be repeating myself because I'll take on issues that the novel doesn't touch: Richard and Alec's failure to deal with the unpleasant role of women in their society, and a little bit of Alec's family history. I wrote "The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death," and it was published in the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1991.

I did try to write other short stories, but these characters don't fit comfortably into that format—or I don't. "Red-Cloak" was the very first thing I ever wrote about Richard and Alec (and the very first piece I ever sold! It was published in 1982 by Stuart David Schiff in the Stephen King issue of his magazine *Whispers*). My first novel went through many false starts as I slavishly tried to copy the style of "Red-Cloak" and work in elements of other short-story fragments…before finally heading off in a different direction altogether, to produce the novel you hold in your hands.

By 1992 I was hooked; I had started a new novel that begins some fifteen years after this one with the Mad Duke Tremontaine deciding to train his niece Katherine as a swordsman. Shortly thereafter, my public radio career took over my life, as I became host of a national series called *Sound & Spirit*, *so* I put that book on the back burner. Meanwhile, I'd gotten together with Delia Sherman, another novelist, who admitted to having read *Swordspoint* more than once. We started to play "What happens next?" if only to amuse ourselves on long car trips—but, both being writers, we decided it would be fun to get it all down, so together we wrote the novella "The Fall of the Kings" for Nicola Griffith and Stephen Pagel's 1997 anthology *Bending the Landscape: Fantasy*. That novella became the seed of our 2002 novel, *The Fall of the Kings*. It takes place some sixty years after this book, but many of the people from *Swordspoint* appear in cameo as ghosts or elders or legends to their descendants. Its protagonists are an idealistic University scholar and a troubled young nobleman with interesting relatives. As a writer of historical fiction, Delia was particularly interested in plumbing the country's history to see what sort of past would have evolved into *Swordspoint*'s present, and, as a self-described "recovering academic," she was interested in slamming the University. But no matter how much she begged and argued, I still refused to name the city.

The short story "The Death of the Duke" came to me as a sort of fantasia, a meditation on the ending of one set of lives and the beginning of the next. "Holy smokes!" (or words to that effect) exulted the editor, Patrick Nielsen Hayden; "I've got the Missing Link!" It appeared in his 1998 anthology *Starlight 2*.

I watch myself changing as I get older. I watch the world changing around me, too. Neither of us should be surprised, but sometimes we are anyway. I've stopped worrying about repeating myself. I am eager to explore these transformations—and what better laboratory than an imagined city that already comes complete with its own past and possible future?

So I give up. I love this place, I love these people, and I want to find out what happens next.

Ellen Kushner
Boston, Massachusetts
2002

To justify her passion for interconnected fiction, Kushner and friends have founded the Young Trollopes literary movement (named for the novelist Anthony Trollope), a branch of Interstitial Fiction dedicated to character-based writing, to generosity of spirit, and to genuine affection for both characters and readers. More information at: www.endicott-studio.com.

The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death

ELLEN KUSHNER

AFTER THE FIGHT, Richard was thirsty. He decided to leave the parrots alone for now. Parrots were supposed to be unlucky for swordsmen. In this case the curse seemed to have fallen on his opponent. Curious, he had asked the wounded man, "Did you slam into me on purpose?" People did sometimes, to provoke a fight with Richard St Vier, the master swordsman who wouldn't take challenges from just anyone. But the wounded man only pressed his white lips together. The rest of him looked green. Some people just couldn't take the sight of their own blood.

Richard realized he'd seen him before, in a Riverside bar. He was a tough named Jim—or Tim—Something. Not much of a swordsman; the sort of man who made his way in the lawless Riverside district on bravado, and earned his living in the city doing cheapjack sword jobs for merchants aping the nobility in their hiring of swordsmen.

A man with a wreath of freesias hanging precariously over one ear came stumbling up. "Oh, Tim," he said mournfully. "Oh, Tim, I told you that fancy claret was too much for you." He caught hold of the wounded man's arm, began hauling him to his feet. As a matched set, Richard recognized them: they'd been the ritual guards in the wedding procession he'd seen passing through the market square earlier that afternoon.

"Sorry," the flower-decked drunk said to St Vier. "Tim didn't mean to give you trouble, you understand?" Tim groaned. "He's not used to claret, see."

"Don't worry about it," Richard said charitably. No wonder Tim's swordplay had been less than linear.

Over their heads the caged parrots started squawking again. The parrot lady climbed down from the box where she'd escaped to get a better view of the fight. With St Vier there to back her up, she shook her apron at the two ruffians to shoo them as if they were chickens escaped from the yard. The children who'd surrounded them, first to see if the quiet man was going to buy a parrot so they could see one taken down, and then to watch the fight, laughed and shrieked and made chicken noises after the disappearing toughs.

But people made way for Richard St Vier as he headed in the direction of a stall selling drinks. The parrot lady collared one of the street kids, saying, "See that? You can tell your grandchildren you saw St Vier fight right here." Oh, honestly, Richard thought, it hadn't been much of a fight; more like bumping into someone on the street.

He leaned on the wooden counter, trying to decide what he wanted.

"Hey," said a young voice at his elbow. "I'll buy you a drink."

He thought it was a woman, from the voice. Women sometimes tried to pick him up after fights. But he glanced down and saw a pug-faced boy looking at him through slitted eyes, the way kids do when they're trying to look older than they are. This one wasn't very old. "That was real good, the way you did that," the boy said. "I mean the quick double feint and all."

"Thank you," the swordsman answered courteously. His mother had raised him with good manners, and some old habits cling, even in the big city. Sometimes he could almost hear her say, *Just because you can kill people whenever you want to doesn't mean you have a license to be rude to anyone.* He let the boy buy them both some fancy drink made with raspberries. They drank silently, the boy peering over the rim of his cup. It was good; Richard ordered them both another.

"Yeah," the kid said. "I think you're the best there is, you know?"

"Thanks," said the swordsman. He put some coins on the counter.

"Yeah." The kid self-consciously fingered the sword at his own side. "I fight too. I had this idea, see—if you needed a servant or something."

"I don't," the swordsman said.

"Well, you know," the boy went on anyway. "I could, like, make up the fire in the morning. Carry water. Cook you stuff. Maybe when you practice, I could be—if you need somebody to help you out a little—"

"No," said St Vier. "Thank you. There are plenty of schools for you to learn in."

"Yeah, but they're not…"

"I know. But that's the way it is."

He walked away from the bar, not wanting to hear any more argument. Behind him the kid started to follow, then fell back.

Across the square he met his friend Alec. "You've been in a fight," Alec said. "I missed it," he added, faintly accusing.

"Someone slammed into me by the parrot cages. It was funny." Richard smiled now at the memory. "I didn't see him coming, and for a moment I thought it was an earthquake! Swords were out before he could apologize—if he meant to apologize. He was drunk."

"You didn't kill him," Alec said, as if he'd heard the story already.

"Not in this part of town. That doesn't go down too well with the Watch here."

"I hope you weren't thinking of getting a parrot again."

Richard grinned, falling into step beside his tall friend. It was a familiar argument. "They're so decorative, Alec. And you could teach it to talk."

"Let some bird steal all my best lines? Anyhow, they eat worms. I'm not getting up to catch worms."

"They eat bread and fruit. I asked this time."

"Too expensive."

They were passing through the nice section of the city, headed down to the wharves. On the other side of the river was the district called Riverside, where the swordsman lived with sharpsters and criminals, beyond reach of the law. It would not have been a safe place for a man like Alec, who barely knew one end of a knife from another, but the swordsman St Vier had made it clear what would happen to anyone who touched his friend. Riverside tolerated eccentrics. The tall scholar, with his student slouch and aristocratic accent, was becoming a known quantity along with the master swordsman.

"If you're feeling like throwing your money around," Alec persisted, "why don't you get us a servant? You need someone to polish your boots."

"I take good care of my boots," Richard said, stung in an area of competence. "You're the one who needs it."

"Yes," Alec happily agreed. "I do. Someone to go to the market for us, and keep visitors away, and start the fire in winter, and bring us breakfast in bed…"

"Decadent," St Vier said. "You can go to the market yourself. And I keep Visitors' away just fine. I don't understand why you think it would be fun to have some stranger living with us. If you wanted that sort of life, you should have—" He stopped before he could say the unforgivable. But Alec, in one of his sudden shifts of attitude, which veered like the wind over a small pond, finished cheerfully for him, "I should have stayed on the Hill with my rich relatives. But they never kill people—not out in the open where we can all enjoy it, anyway. You're so much more entertaining…"

Richard's lips quirked downward, unsuccessfully hiding a smile. "Loved only for my sword," he said.

Alec said carefully, "If I were the sort of person who makes crude jokes, you would be very embarrassed now."

Richard, who was never embarrassed, said, "What a good thing you're not. What do you want for dinner?"

THEY WENT TO ROSALIE'S, where they ate stew in the cool underground tavern and talked business with their friends. It was the usual hodgepodge of fact and rumor. A new swordsman had appeared across town claiming to be a foreign champion, but someone's cousin in service had recognized him as Lord Averil's old valet, with fencing lessons and a dyed mustache…Hugo Seville had finally gotten so low as to take a job offing some noble's wife… or maybe he'd only been offered it, or someone wished he had.

Nobles with jobs for St Vier sent their messages to Rosalie's. But today there was nothing. "Just some nervous jerk looking for an heiress."

"Aren't we all!"

"Sorry, Reg, this one's taken; run off with some swordsman."

"Anyone we know?"

"Naw…fairy-tale swordsman—they say all girls have run off with one, when it's really their father's clerk."

Big Missy, who worked the mattress trade at Glinley's put her arm around Richard. "I could run off with a swordsman." Seated, he came up only to her bosom, which he leaned back into, smiling across to Alec, eyebrows raised a little provocatively.

Alec took the bait: "Careful," the tall scholar told her; "he bites."

"Oh?" Missy leered becomingly at him. "Don't you, pretty baby?"

Alec tried to hide a flush of pure delight. No one had ever called him "pretty baby" before, especially not women other people paid to get into.

"Of course I do," he said with all the brittle superciliousness he was master of. "Hard."

Missy released St Vier, advancing on his tall young friend. "Oh *good*…" she breathed huskily. "I like 'em rough." Her huge arms pointed like weather vanes into the rising wind. "Come to me, lover."

The old-time crowd at Rosalie's was ecstatic. "Missy, don't leave me for that bag of bones!" "So long, then, Alec; let us know how it comes out!" "Try it, boy; you just might like it!"

Alec looked like he wanted to sink into the floor. He held his ground, but his hauteur, already badly applied, was slipping treacherously.

At the last minute, Richard took pity on him. "I saw a wedding today," he said to the room at large.

"Oh, yeah," said Lucie; "we heard you killed one of the guards. Finally made them earn their pay, huh?"

"Thought you didn't *do* weddings. Master St Vier." Sam Bonner looked around for approval of his wit. Everyone knew that St Vier disdained guard work.

"I don't," Richard said. "This was after. And I didn't kill him. Tim Somebody."

"No lie! Tim Porker? Half-grown mustache, big ears? Said he hurt himself falling down some stairs. Dirty liar."

"No weddings for Richard," Alec said. He'd regained his aplomb, but was still eyeing Missy warily from across the room. "He is morally opposed to the buying and selling of heiresses."

"No, I'm not. It's just not interesting work, being a wedding guard. It doesn't mean anything anymore, just rich people showing they can afford swordsmen to make their procession look pretty. It's no—"

"Challenge," Alec finished for him. "You know, we could set that to music, you say it so often, and hawk it on the street as a ballad. What a good thing for the rich that other swordsmen aren't too proud to take their money, or we'd never see an heiress safely bedded down. What's the reward offered for the runaway? Is there one? Or is she damaged goods already?"

"There's a reward for information. But you have to go Uptown to get it."

"I'm not above going Uptown," said Lucie haughtily; "I've been there before. But I don't know as I'd turn in a girl that's run away for love…"

"Ohh," bawled Rosalie across the tavern; "is that what you call it?"

"Speaking of money," Alec said, rattling the dicebox, "is anyone interested in a small bet on whether I can roll multiples of three three times running?"

Richard got up to go. When Alec had drunk enough to become interested in mathematical odds, the evening's entertainment was over for him. St Vier was not a gambling man.

The Riverside streets were dark, but St Vier knew his way between the close-set houses, past the place where the broken gutter overflowed, around the potholes of pried-up cobbles, through the back alleys, and home. His own lodgings were in a cul-de-sac off the main street; part of an old town house, a discarded veteran of grander days. Richard lived on the second story, in what had once been the music rooms.

On the ground floor, Marie's rooms were dark. He stopped before the front door: in the recessed entryway, there was a flash of white. Cautiously St Vier drew his sword and advanced.

A small woman practically flung herself onto his blade. "Oh, help!" she cried shrilly. "You must help me!"

"Back off," said St Vier. It was too dark to see much but her shape. She was wearing a heavy cloak, and something about her was very young. "What's the matter?"

"I am desperate," she gasped. "I am in terrible danger. Only you can help me! My enemies are everywhere. You must hide me."

"You're drunk," said Richard, although her accent wasn't Riverside. "Go away before you get hurt."

The woman fell back against the door. "No, please. It means my life."

"You had better go home," Richard said. To speed her on her way, he said, "Do you need me to escort you somewhere? Or shall I hire you a torch?"

"No!" It sounded more annoyed than desperate, but quickly turned back to pleading: "I dare not go home. Please listen to me. I am—a Lady of Quality. My parents want to marry me to a man I hate—an old miser with bad breath and groping hands."

"That's too bad," Richard said politely, amused in spite of the inconvenience. "What do you want me to do about it? Do you want him killed?"

"Oh! Oh. No. Thank you. That is, I just need a place to stay. Until they stop looking for me."

Richard said, "Did you know there's a reward out for you?"

"There is?" she squeaked. "But—oh. How gratifying. How…like them."

"Come upstairs." St Vier held the door open. "Mind the third step; it's broken. When Marie gets back, you can stay with her. She's a, she takes in customers, but I think propriety says you're better off with her than with me."

"But I'd *rather* stay with you, sir!"

In the pitch-black of the stairs, Richard halted. The girl almost stumbled into him. "No," St Vier said. "If you're going to start that, you're not coming any farther."

"I didn't—" she squeaked, and began again: "That's not what I meant at all. Honestly."

Upstairs, he pushed open the door and lit a few candles. "Oh!" the girl gasped. "Is this—is this where you—"

"I practice in this room," he said. "The walls are wrecked. You can sit on that chaise, if you want—it's not as rickety as it looks." But the girl went over to the wall, touching the pockmarks where his practice sword had chipped holes in the old plaster. Her fingertips were gentle, almost reverent.

It was an old room, with traces of its former grandeur clinging about the edges in the form of gilded laurel-leaf molding and occasional pieces of cherub. The person who had last seen fresh paint there had long since turned to dust. The only efforts that its present occupants had made to decorate it were an expensive tapestry hung over the fireplace, and a couple of very detailed silver candlesticks, a few leather-bound books, and an enamel vase, scattered about the room in no discernible order.

"I'd offer you the bed," said Richard, "but it would annoy Alec. Just make yourself comfortable in here."

With the pleasantly light feeling of well-earned tiredness, the swordsman drifted into the room that held his big carven bed and his chests for clothes and swords, undoing the accoutrements of his trade:

unbuckling the straps of his sword belt, slipping the knife sheath out of his vest. He paced the room, laying them down, unlacing and unpeeling his clothes, and got into bed. He was just falling asleep when he heard Alec's voice in the other room:

"Richard! You've found us a servant after all—how enterprising of you!"

"No—" he started to explain, and then thought he'd better get up to do it.

The girl was hunched up at the back of the chaise longue, looking awed and defenseless, her cloak still wrapped tight around her. Alec loomed over her, his usual untoward clutter of unruly limbs. Sometimes drinking made him graceful, but not tonight.

"Well," the girl was offering hopefully, "I can cook. Make up the fire. Carry water."

Richard thought, That's the second time I've heard that today. He started to say, "We couldn't ask a Lady of Quality—"

"Can you do boots?" Alec asked with interest.

"No," Richard stated firmly before she could say yes. "No servants."

"Well," Alec asked peevishly, "then what's she doing here? Not the obvious, I hope."

"Alec. Since when am I obvious?"

"Oh, never mind." Alec turned clumsily on his heel. "I'm going to bed. Have fun. See that there's hot shaving water in the morning."

Richard shrugged apologetically at the girl, who was staring after them in fascination. It was a shrug meaning *Don't pay any attention to him;* but he couldn't help wondering if there would be hot water to shave with. Meanwhile, he meant to pay attention to Alec himself.

ALEC WOKE UP UNABLE TO TELL WHERE his limbs left off and Richard's began. He heard Richard say, "This is embarrassing. Don't move, Alec, all right?"

A third person was in the room with them, standing over the bed with a drawn sword. "How did you get in here?" Richard asked.

The pug-faced boy said, "It was easy. Don't you recognize me? My enemies are everywhere. I think I should, you know, get some kind of prize for that, don't you? I mean, I tricked you, didn't I?"

St Vier eased himself onto his elbows. “Which are you, an heiress disguised as a snotty brat, or a brat disguised as an heiress?”

“Or,” Alec couldn’t resist adding, “a boy disguised as a girl disguised as a boy?”

“It doesn’t matter,” St Vier said. “Your grip is too tight.”

“Oh—sorry.” Still keeping the sword’s point on target, the kid eased his grip. “Sorry—I’ll work on it. I knew I’d never get in like this. And girls are safe with you; everyone knows you don’t like girls.”

“Oh, no,” Richard protested, surprised. “I like girls very much.”

“Richard,” drawled Alec, whose left leg was beginning to cramp, “you’re breaking my heart.”

“But you like *him* better.”

“Well, yes, I do.”

“Jealous?” Alec snarled sweetly. “Please die and go away. I’m going to have the world’s worst hangover if I don’t get back to sleep soon.”

Richard said, “I don’t teach. I can’t explain how I do what I do.”

“Please,” said the boy with the sword. “Can’t you just take a look at me? Tell me if I’m any good. If you say I’m good, I’ll know.”

“What if I say you’re not?”

“I’m good,” the kid said stiffly. “I’ve got to be.”

Richard slid out of bed, in one fluid motion regathering his limbs to himself. Alec admired that—like watching a chess expert solve a check in one simple move. Richard was naked, polished as a sculpture in the moonlight. In his hand was the sword that had been there from the start.

“Defend yourself,” St Vier said, and the boy fell back in cautious *garde*.

“If you kill him,” said Alec, hands comfortably behind his head, “try not to make it one of the messy ones.”

“I’m *not*—going to kill—him.” With what was, for him, atypical flashiness, Richard punctuated each word with a blow of steel on steel. At his words the boy rallied, and returned the strokes. “Again,” snapped the swordsman, still attacking. There was no kindness in his voice. “We’re going to repeat the whole sequence, if you can remember it. Parry all my thrusts this time.”

Sometimes the boy caught the quick-darting strokes, and sometimes his eye or his memory failed, and the blade stopped an inch from his heart, death suspended by the swordsman’s will.

"New sequence," Richard rapped out. "Learn it."

They repeated the moves. Alec thought the boy was getting better, more assured. Then the swordsman struck hard on the boy's blade, and the sword flew out of his pupil's hand, clanging on the floor, rolled into a corner. "I told you your grip was too tight. Go get it."

The boy retrieved his sword, and the lesson resumed. Alec began to be bored by the endless repetition. "Your arm's getting tired," St Vier observed. "Don't you practice with weights?"

"Don't have—any weights."

"Get some. No, don't stop. In a real fight, you can't stop."

"A real fight—wouldn't go on this long."

"How do you know? Been in any?"

"Yes. One.—*Two*."

"You won both," Richard said coldly, his arm never resting, his feet never still. "Makes you think you're a hero of the field. *Pay attention*." He rapped sharply on the blade. "Keep going." The boy countered with a fancy double riposte, changing the line of attack with the lightest pressure of his fingers. Richard St Vier deflected the other's point, and brought his own clean past the boy's defenses.

The boy cried out at the light kiss of steel. But the swordsman did not stop the movements of the play. "It's a nick," he said. "Never mind the blood."

"Oh. But—"

"You wanted a lesson. Take it. All right, fine, you're scared now. You can't let it make a difference."

But it did make a difference. The boy's defense turned fierce, began to take on the air of desperate attack. Richard let it. They were fighting silently now, and really fighting, although the swordsman kept himself always from doing real damage. He began to play with the boy, leaving tiny openings just long enough to see if he would take advantage of them. The boy took about half—either his eye missed the others, or his body was too slow to act on them. Whatever he did, Richard parried his attacks, and kept him on the defensive.

"Now—" the swordsman said harshly—"Do you want to kill me, or just take me out?"

"I—don't know—"

"For death"—Richard's blade flew in—"straight to the heart. Always the heart."

The boy froze. His death was cold against his burning skin. Richard St Vier dropped the point, raised it to resume the fight. The boy was sweating, panting, from fear as much as exertion. "A good touch—can be anywhere. As light as you like—or as deep."

The pug-nosed boy stood still. His nose was running. He still held his sword, while blood welled onto his skin and clothing from five different places.

"You're good," Richard St Vier said, "but you can be better. Now get out of here."

"Richard, he's bleeding," Alec said quietly.

"I know he's bleeding. People do when they fight."

"It's night," Alec said, "in Riverside. People are out. You said you didn't want to kill him."

"Hand me that sheet." Sweat was cooling on Richard's body; he wrapped the linen around himself.

"There's brandy," Alec said. "I'll get it."

"I'm sorry I'm bleeding on your floor," the boy said. He wiped his nose with his sleeve. "I'm crying from shock, that's all. Not really crying."

He did not examine his own wounds. Alec did it for him, dabbing them with brandy. "You're remarkable," he told the boy. "I've been trying to get Richard to lose his temper forever." He handed the flask to St Vier. "You can drink the rest."

Alec undid what the sword had left of the boy's jacket, and began pulling out the shirt. "It's a girl," he said abruptly, unsuspecting midwife to unnatural birth.

The girl said something rude. She'd stopped crying.

"So are you," Alec retorted. His hand darted into her breast pocket, pulled out the small book that had rested there, its soft leather cover warm and sweaty. He flipped it open, snapped it shut.

"Don't you know how to read?" the girl asked nastily.

"I don't read this kind of trash. *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*. My sister had it; they all do. It's about some noble girl who comes home from a ball and finds a swordsman waiting in her room for her. He doesn't kill her; he fucks her instead. She loves it. The End."

"No—" she said, her face flushed—"You've got it wrong. You're stupid. You don't know anything about it."

"Hey," said Alec, "you're cute with your nose running, sweetheart—you know that?"

"You're stupid!" she said again fiercely. "*Stupid bastard.*" Harsh and precise, as though the words were new in her mouth. "What do you know about anything?"

"I know more than you think. I may not have your exceptional skill with steel, but I know about your other tricks. I know what works for you."

"Oh," she flared, "so it's come down to *that*." Furious, she was starting to cry again, against her will, furious about that, too. "The sword doesn't matter to you; the book doesn't matter—*that's* all you can understand. You don't know anything—anything at all!"

"Oh, don't I?" Alec breathed. His eyes were bright, a spot of color high on each cheek. "You think I don't know all about it? With my sister, it was horses—both real and imaginary." He mastered himself enough to assume his usual sneer, passionless and obnoxious. "Mares in the stable, golden stallions in the orchard. She told me their names. I used to eat the apples she picked for them, to make it seem more real. I know about it," he said bitterly. "My sister's magic horses were powerful; she rode them across sea and land; she loved them and gave them names. But in the end they failed her, didn't they? In the end they took her nowhere, brought her nothing at all."

Richard sat on the edge of the bed, brandy forgotten in his hand. Alec never spoke of his family. Richard didn't know he had a sister. He listened.

"My sister was married—to a man chosen for her, a man she didn't like, a man she was afraid of. Those goddamned horses waited for her in the orchard, waited all night for her to come to them. They would have borne her anywhere, for love of her—but she never came…and then it was her wedding day." Alec lifted the book high, slammed it against the far wall. "I know all about it."

The girl was looking at Alec, not at her broken book. "And where were you?" she said. "Where were you when this forced marriage took place—waiting in the orchard with them? Oh, I know, too—you took them and you escaped." Holding herself stiffly against her cuts, she bent over, picked

up the book, smoothed it back into shape. “You don’t know. You don’t know at all. And you don’t want to. Either of you.”

“Alec,” Richard said, “come to bed.”

“Thank you for the lesson,” she said to the swordsman. “I’ll remember.”

“It wouldn’t have made a difference,” he told her. “You’ll have to find someone else. That’s the way it is. Be careful, though.”

“Thank you,” she said again. “I will be careful, now that there’s something to be careful for. You meant what you said, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Richard said. “I don’t usually get that angry. I meant it.”

“Good.” She turned in the doorway, asked in the same flat, cold tone, “What’s your sister’s name?”

Alec was still where he’d been when he threw the book, standing stiff and pale. Richard knew that his reaction, when it hit, would be violent.

“I said, what’s her name?”

Alec told her.

“Good. I’m going to find her. I’ll give her this”—the book, now fingerprinted with dried blood—“and your love.”

She stopped again, opened the book, and read: “‘I was a girl until tonight. I am a woman now.’ That’s how it ends. But you never read it, so you’ll never know what comes in between.” She smiled a steel-biting smile. “I have, and I do. I’ll be all right out there, won’t I?”

“Come to bed, Alec,” Richard said again; “you’re shaking.”

The Duke of Riverside

ELLEN KUSHNER

THAT KID NEVER BELONGED HERE. We all knew that from the moment he walked through the door, looking nervous and madder than hell. Bad combination. Everyone figured he had a weapon, because people like that usually do. The drinkers stopped drinking, the barmaids stopped serving, and the dicers held up their dice mid-roll. Sukey moved a little closer to Annie, as the girls like to protect each other when they can.

Rosalie stepped forward. It is her bar, after all. "What can I get you?" she asked.

"What can you get me?" His voice told everyone that was the stupidest question he'd ever been asked. "What can you get me?" All sneer. And that snooty Hill accent. Definitely not from around here. "Do you happen to have Ludlow's treatise, *On the Causes of Nature*? Oh, no, they banned it. How about a roast peacock, then? Or a cup of really strong poison?"

Rosalie rolled her eyes. "I'll go see," she said. Like she'd already taken his measure and decided he wasn't dangerous after all, just nuts. She turned her back on him, and the whole room relaxed.

He was a scholar, clearly. He had that long student hair, tied back with a piece of string. And that long black robe they all wear, hanging off his bony shoulders like laundry, only it hadn't been washed for a while. But pissed-off scholars don't usually come down to Riverside. Hell, they don't even come here to get pissed. They know it's a place you're likely to get rolled, rolled and then maybe killed. Nobody drinks here who doesn't have to.

Red Sukey sidled up to him. She'd been holding on to Annie, but when Rosalie turned her back, Sukey grabbed her chance. "Buy me a drink?"

He looked down at her. He was incredibly tall. "What for? Are you thirsty?"

She's not very old. Not much experience there. "No." She moved a little closer to him, to show him what she had. "I'd be nice to you."

He got it then. "For a drink? Are you serious?"

We all waited to see if he had any money. Most men, you mention money, their hand goes automatically to where they keep their purse, just for an instant. But his hand didn't even go to his belt. Nothing, then; or he was smarter than he looked. I, myself, was willing to wait and see.

And then Nimble Willie stuck his head in through the doorway gasping, "Fight! Fight!" and we forgot all about the bony scholar and headed for the street to see. Poor Archer Fink had finally gotten St Vier to take his challenge, god knows how. Richard St Vier was too good to fight a newbie like Archer, and if Archer didn't know it, we all did. Probably it was that girl of his, the blonde, egging Fink on to show his stuff. Maybe she even thought he really had a chance.

We're used to seeing them come and go, these young swordsmen. They fight like stags in autumn, to prove who's best. Only, being swordsmen, they tend to kill each other off. That's how you get good jobs in the city, not to mention respect here in Riverside.

That day my money was on St Vier, but so was everyone else's. I only won eighteen brass minnows.

It was done in a minute—barely time to make our bets. St Vier lunged quick and hard, Archer Fink grunted and wheezed, and it was all over, blood shooting up after the tip of the sword when St Vier pulled it out.

The student was right there. He was standing very still; he didn't even put up his hand to keep the blood from hitting him. His black robe was spattered with shiny black drops. He stared at the body like he'd never seen one before.

St Vier walked away from the fight and into the tavern. Rosalie brought him a drink. She loved that he drank at her place. It brought her custom. When the nobles from the Hill were looking for a swordsman to hire, they sent their servants down to Rosalie's to find him. She loved that, too.

The scholar followed him in. "I'll have one, too," he said to Rosalie.

She said, "First, let me see your money."

"You didn't ask *him* for money."

Rosalie snorted. "St Vier, I know. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm no one," he said fiercely. "Forget it."

"Who are you?" Rosalie said again, in that tone of voice that always gets her cash on the barrel.

He turned his head and looked down at her. It was a long damn way. "Alec," he said.

"Is that all?"

"Just Alec."

The swordsman was ignoring the whole thing. He was leaning on the bar, knocking down his thirst with his back to them both—though one hand never left the sword at his side.

"St Vier," the kid said aloud. He pushed loose hair back from his face, not even noticing the smear of blood he left there. The air around him started to feel dangerous again. Maybe it was his voice, the way he said the name. "St Vier," he said again, long and low. I've heard nobles use that voice, up on the Hill, when they're telling a servant they want something done. Yeah. I did some work up there once. But just once. They talk real slow, like they have all the time in the world. Which they do.

The swordsman heard it, too. He turned his head. "Yes?"

"You're Richard St Vier?"

The swordsman nodded.

"And you kill people."

St Vier looked him up and down. It stretched his neck some; the kid was a real beanpole. He must've seen what we all saw: young, skinny, hungry, poor, bad-tempered, and out of place.

"Sometimes I do."

"Do you ever kill them just because they're no earthly use to anyone at all?"

"No. No, I don't think I've ever done that."

"Well." The kid stepped back, putting a sword's length between them. "That is disappointing. What do you do it for, then?"

"Sometimes just for practice."

"Like now, for instance? Was that just for practice?"

St Vier's eyes darted over to where Archer's girl had begun a horrible racket in the corner, weeping and wailing. Sukey and Annie were trying to keep her quiet with cheap brandy. For a swordsman, St Vier is pretty easygoing. But he never likes a lot of noise.

"In a way."

"It must be very tiring, killing all those people."

"Not very."

"You'll do it again, then. Soon."

The swordsman looked at him again. St Vier was popular on the Hill those days, fighting for the nobles at their parties and stuff. Demo matches only: First Blood, hardly ever to the Death. No wonder he liked to practice in Riverside. Nobles can be pretty squeamish. But it's a good bet St Vier would know that voice pretty well by now, the low, purring voice this ragged guy was using. "Look," St Vier said, "do you have a job for me? Is that what this is about?"

The student tugged his frayed cuff down. "A job? Me? I don't even have the price of a beer."

"Then what do you want?"

"I don't suppose you'd kill me for free."

A smile forced its way onto the swordsman's face. "No."

"For practice, then?"

"Can you fight?"

The scholar opened his robe to show nothing hung on his belt, not even a knife. "Not particularly, no."

"That's no good, then. I like a challenge."

"Oh." The young scholar turned away. "Maybe later, then. But remember," he said over his shoulder, "you had your chance."

RICHARD ST VIER WATCHED THE TALL MAN WALK OUT of the bar alone. Sometimes nobles came down to Riverside in disguise, looking for kicks or for connection. Some disguise. He wasn't just ragged, he was dirty. His face was young but thin and hollow like hunger. A starving nobleman? A jumped-up servant? A tutor in disgrace?

Richard shook his head. Poor kid. Whatever he was doing in Riverside, he was going to have an interesting time while he lasted. Maybe he should have bought him a beer, for a sort of welcome. The first day was always hard, here.

I, MYSELF, DID NOT EXPECT TO SEE that Alec again.

But then I kept hearing about him. Wandering Riverside like a lost soul, trying not to get laid but to get killed, near as I could tell. It should have

been easy. He was going about it exactly the right way—insulting people, asking stupid questions…The thing is, he was unarmed. He had no money. Sometimes he made people laugh, saying things no one else would dare to. No one really wanted to be the one to off him. He was probably crazy. That's a different kind of dangerous.

I saw him again at Rosalie's a few days later. I was looking over some very fine silver spoons that Hal had managed to find in a house uptown, and in walks the skinny kid, right up to where Rosalie is ladling out stew for Fabian Greenspan.

"Is that food?" he says to her. "Or are you trying to get rid of old wash water?"

"You could use a little of both," Rosalie retorted.

Fabian sniggered. Some of the soup he was eating came out his nose.

"Oh, look," the kid said. "It's medicinal, too."

Fabian had the shakes. It was early in the day for him—just past noon—and Rosalie wanted to feed him before he started drinking and she'd have to throw him out. He couldn't handle it at either end.

"Hungry?" Rosalie asked Alec.

"Hardly. I *like* rotten pears and cast-off cheese mold. And I've found the best place for getting them. You should try it. Slenderizing."

"Hey," Fabian protested. He had a soft spot for Rosalie.

The boy looked down his long nose. "Well, you do get thicker as you get older, don't you?"

"Hey!" Fabian roared feebly, and went for the kid.

"Hey," said another voice, a calmer voice. The swordsman St Vier was peeling Fabian off that Alec character.

"Hey, Richard," Rosalie said calmly. "Want some stew?" If she doesn't like you, she just ignores you.

The young scholar was standing very stiff. I guess he'd never been attacked by a guy with the shakes before. Or he wasn't used to being ignored.

"Richard St Vier," he drawled. "You're off your game."

"No," St Vier said; "I ate already." He was always polite, even to drunks.

"You're a disappointment," the scholar went on.

The swordsman turned to him, giving him his full attention. "How so?"

A swordsman's full attention is not something you really want on you. It gave me a chill. The tall kid's eyes glittered hard, like he was fevered, but his skin was pale, like he was casting his final throw.

"It's been three days, now. You haven't killed a soul. Don't think I haven't noticed. You haven't even stepped on a bug. I think you're vastly overrated. What's the matter, have you lost your nerve?"

The swordsman stood up. "Come with me."

This is it, we thought. *Good-bye, scholar.*

The scholar's hands were shaking; I was close enough to see that. But he thrust his pale face forward and followed St Vier out of the tavern.

It wasn't going to be a pretty death. St Vier wouldn't waste good swordsmanship on an unarmed man. But I had a bet on with Hal, so we followed them out there.

The scholar was standing against a wall, very white in the face against his black robe and the crummy stone. "Remember," he was saying, fast and breathy, "one blow to the heart. They say you're quick."

Young men can be real fools. Not just the scholar, but the young swordsman we all called Dapper Dan, who must have taken a bad notion to impress St Vier. Guys like that think being a swordsman's all about risks and big gestures, and he made one now.

"Allow me," I heard him say, as he drew his blade.

St Vier was St Vier. Dan should never have shown cold steel around him. Someone with slower reflexes might have taken the time to notice that the blade wasn't coming in his direction. But Richard St Vier moved fast.

You have to love the guy. He drew and slashed right across Dan from the side, a gorgeous twist nobody else could have made in time. Dan squawked and fell, and St Vier said, "Damn," when he realized what he'd done.

The scholar hadn't even had time to move out of the way. He stared down at poor Dan.

"You should have let him," he said.

"It wasn't his business," said St Vier. But I was out there, and I saw: He hadn't drawn until Dan did. Whatever he was planning to do with the scholar, it wasn't the long cold kiss of steel, as the poets say. "Would you like a drink?"

They walked back into Rosalie's tavern together, and that was that. From then on, you never saw them apart.

Nobody bet on when they started sleeping together, because there was no way of finding out for sure. Their landlady, Marie, the whore and laundress who lets out rooms above the courtyard of the old place with the well where she washes, is usually a pretty good egg, but she got all prissy with, "Master St Vier's business is his own, and at least he pays his rent on time most months, not like some…" But why else did St Vier make it clear over and over that anyone who laid a finger on his crazy student would have him to answer to? More than one bully, pimp, and bravo fell that year when they tried it anyway. As far as St Vier was concerned, there was one rule: Don't Mess with Alec, no matter what.

I guess Lord Horn didn't know about St Vier's Alec rule. How could he, when he lived way up on the Hill with the rest of them? What some old noble wanted Alec for was anybody's guess, but not everyone was sorry when Alec disappeared for a while. It made the swordsman jumpy as hell, though. He made some inquiries, killed a few hired toughs who should have known not to mess with Riversiders, got Alec back, all right—and then he went after Lord Horn and took care of him, too.

Well, what else could he do? He had his point to make. But the city didn't see it that way. Brought St Vier up on murder charges, threw him in the Chop. Nobody liked it, but what could we do? We don't ask anyone in the city to do us any favors. We look after our own, no squealers; but if you're taken, good luck to you.

Alec broke that rule. For St Vier, see. Of course, we didn't know it at the time. We thought Alec had left again because he was bored or lonely or scared shitless. Fabian Greenspan swore he'd seen him lying with his throat slit off Fuller's Way. But Fabian doesn't always see so clearly. Red Sukey said he'd thrown himself from the Bridge because of the tragedy of his eternal love. But Sukey likes theatre. Then Nimble Willie came back from plying his trade over by the Council Hall, claiming Alec had passed him riding in a carriage with the Duchess Tremontaine's crest on it, all decked out in green velvet and gold lace. That was a little startling, because Willie's pretty reliable, but not nearly as startling as when St Vier turns up again the next day, and Alec a day or so later, hair cut short but wearing the same old black robe, rattier than ever. So we couldn't help ragging on Willie with, "So where's the gold and velvet, Willie?"

No velvet—and no money, either. Maybe he spent it all to spring St Vier. I know that Alec is broke again because I try touching him for five in silver against my next lucky job uptown and he gives me one of those speeches that basically translates as "Get away from me or I'll get St Vier to rip your balls off." Nice to know they're still such excellent friends. Everything back to normal. Except word trickles down from people with legitimate jobs up in the city (meaning Riversiders who just couldn't hack it any more, gone up there to scrub floors and dishes) that Alec is in fact a very close relative of the duchess. So maybe he's lying about the money. But, then, why doesn't he buy himself some decent clothes?

ALEC CAME STORMING OUT OF THE BEDROOM in their rooms at Marie's, shoving his hair back behind his ears. Richard stopped practicing long enough to get out of his way. Alec never really knew where his body was in relation to anything around him.

"Have you seen my boots?" Alec demanded. "I took them off last night, and they've vanished. I think someone ate them. I'm going to the market. Please don't consume anything else useful while I'm gone. The shad are in, and they sell out fast. I'll bring some home. Where are my boots?"

"Behind the bed."

"I've looked there."

"Look again."

Alec emerged fully shod, clutching his robe to his throat. "I've lost my cloak pin."

"It's here." Richard picked it up off the mantel, careful not to dislodge Alec's small collection of precious books. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"To protect me from murderous fishwives?"

Alec shoved his hair back behind his ears again, and shook his head with annoyance as it fell forward.

"There's nothing you can do about it," Richard said. "Just wait. It grows when it grows."

"How philosophical," Alec drawled sarcastically. "How very like the wise old farmer in the tutelary readers for young people."

"How long did it take you to grow it out the first time?"

"Years," Alec growled. "And everyone still laughed at me when I got to university because I looked like a new boy. It had just gotten good and long when I left. The one thing I finally got right. And then I had to go and cut it, just to make a nice impression on the Council for the duchess."

"Well, it worked," Richard said.

"Not that it wasn't worth it," Alec added. "She nearly died when she saw me all cleaned up."

The hair would grow long again; meanwhile, there was still enough for Richard to sink his fingers into, and he did.

NOBODY KNOWS WHO OWNS MOST OF RIVERSIDE, but it's probably Alec's relatives, and they've probably buried the deeds, because who really wants their very own piece of this crumbling rabbit warren? Like there's that crazy cat-lady at the top of that old pile on Ferrian Alley. You'd pay *not* to own that house.

Young guys always believe in luck. Most of them never get old. And some, like that Alec, have it all, even if they may not look it at first.

RICHARD WASN'T LOOKING FOR THE LETTERS, but the swordsman had a very good sense for what was around him. He always knew where things stood in a room, and he knew when anything changed. The letters were hidden all over the place: under the mattress, behind Alec's books on the mantelpiece, even in an old pair of winter boots gathering dust in the corner because they needed resoling but no one could ever remember to take them out.

Richard knew Alec would never burn the letters, because there was writing only on one side, and Alec was terrifically cheap. Richard could see that it was good paper—thick and heavy laid, the ink on it crisp and clean. He had no idea what the writing spelt out. But he did recognize the seals, heavy with wax that Alec would probably melt down sooner or later to reuse:

Tremontaine

I was there at Rosalie's the day the news came.

"Tremontaine!" Willie called, breathless, across the tavern. But Alec wouldn't look up from his dice. He was losing, as usual, but as usual refusing

to quit and cut his losses.

"Hey, Alec, listen up!" Nimble Willie finally reached the table where Alec was dicing with Hal and Fat Rodge. "Hey!" he panted. Really, he could hardly breathe. "Didn't you hear me calling you?"

"I heard you calling *someone*. What is it, Willie? You're dripping like a cheap candle and you stink worse than my luck."

"I've got news."

Alec's fingers tightened on the side of the table, and could you blame him? *News* could always be St Vier lying somewhere bleeding his guts out. "Well, spit it out. We're in the middle of a game, here."

"Your granny's gone."

"My 'granny'? Which 'granny' would that be, Willie?"

"You know what I mean. It's the duchess. The Duchess Tremontaine. She's dead. Last night. I came to tell you."

"Oh, re-ally?"

He lifted the dice and looked at them for a long time.

"Snake eyes," he said, and threw.

We all stared at the two perfect spots there in the middle of the table. Then Alec got up and left the tavern. No one saw him again for days. But Hal kept his money for him, down to the last brass minnow, tied up in a handkerchief. You didn't want to piss off St Vier. And clearly, Alec's luck had turned.

AREN'T YOU GOING TO SEE HER OFF?" Richard asked. He was practicing in their rooms with a blunt-tipped sword, stretching and exercising against the wall, which was pitted with the marks of other practice bouts. Alec had steel of his own, a darning needle he'd learned to use in his time at university. It, too, was blunt-tipped, which was good, considering the uses to which Alec put sharp objects.

"I avoided her while she was alive. It seems hypocritical to pursue her now."

"I heard there might be fireworks. You love fireworks."

"They had fireworks last year for Lord Galing. It cheered everyone up. I'm sure the late Duchess Tremontaine would want us all to be as miserable as possible. There will probably be a choir."

Richard knew he was treading on dangerous ground, but he was genuinely curious. "They're not expecting you, then?"

Alec stabbed at the sock. "Oh, they're expecting me, Richard. The show won't be complete without the idiot grandson parading with his savage swordsman."

"Wear your scholar's robe," Richard said cheerfully. "It's black. It will give them fits."

"Shall I put a silver chain around your neck and lead you in the procession?"

Richard winced. "That bad, eh?"

The needle fell still in Alec's hands. "Bad? Oh, so you'd actually mind? I was beginning to think you liked the idea."

Alec hated people knowing anything about him. Even Richard. And now it was out. All over the city. All over Riverside.

"If you wanted to go, I'd come with you, that's all."

Richard went back to practicing, striking his sword rhythmically against the wall, careful not to look at Alec but hearing his acid, honey voice:

"By all means, let's go to the Tremontaine funeral and join the solemn procession of important people showing off just how important they really are. They're expecting us, after all. We wouldn't want to disappoint them. And then we can poke holes in a few. That, they will not be expecting. Think what a thrill it will give the assembled mourners. It will be the talk of the town. The duchess will be utterly forgotten." Alec jabbed at the sock's hole, which was not getting any smaller. "Not that she won't be forgotten soon, anyway. She's got no power anymore, has she? These people are no longer interested. They'll pay their respects, because everyone's watching, and then they'll go right back to trying to figure out who's giving the most important dinner parties now that she's gone. She never liked me, you know. I'm rotten at dinner parties. No conversation. And I slouch. She likes people who are good at things. You impressed her. She'd like it if you went. Did you ever work for her?"

"Never. You know that."

"Go now, then. Go up to the Hill, and show everyone you know how to behave properly. Just because I'm a disgrace doesn't mean you have to be."

"Why would I want to go there without you?"

"Why would you want to go there *with* me?"

Richard put his hands on Alec's shoulders. "Let's not," he said, "go anywhere at all." He could feel the tension radiating along his arms.

"How blissful," Alec drawled. "How domestic."

Richard reached down to uncover Alec's palm. The marks that scored it were vivid red, but the skin unbroken. It was only a darning needle. Richard raised the hand to his lips. The palm was hot and burning.

SO IT LOOKED LIKE EVERYBODY WAS GOING to the Duchess Tremontaine's funeral except Alec. And he was probably the only one actually invited. The rest of Riverside was just going to turn up along the route, which would run from her big house on the Hill to the Stone City outside of town. The nobles would ride in procession behind, and everyone would line up to watch them, which was just fine with us. Nothing better for pickpockets than a good colorful procession—and nothing makes a man want a whore faster than being reminded of mortality.

IF ALEC WANTED TO HIDE THE LETTERS that kept coming, Richard wasn't going to say anything. If Alec wanted to stop crossing the river into the city, wanted to give up excursions to the booksellers and the theater, well, he got that way sometimes. The books were all too old, Alec claimed, and the theater played nothing but comedies. He detested comedies. Alec was drinking all the time. It made him loose-limbed and clumsy, quarrelsome and fanciful. It didn't mean anything, Richard thought.

Then, on their way home from the market, there was a strange swordsman fixed at the end of the alley, blocking their way. The stranger's sword was sheathed, but loudly and clearly he spoke: "I bear challenge to David Alexander Tielman Campion, Duke Tremontaine—"

For a moment, Richard didn't even understand the words. "What the hell?"

"Just kill him," Alec said.

Richard drew his sword. "I'll take the challenge."

The other man drew and saluted.

"Is it to the Death?"

"I hope so," said Alec. "They can hardly expect me to give up the Duchy of Tremontaine for First Blood."

IT WAS ALL OVER TOWN. Alec was heir to Tremontaine. And on either side of the river, people were waiting to kill him before they'd let him into Tremontaine House. Lucky for him he had the greatest swordsman in the city at his side day and night to defend him. The rules were the rules. As long as St Vier was there to take the challenge, honor was satisfied. The nobles had laid out those rules themselves, to keep them from killing each other off when there were better men to die for them. All St Vier had to do was always be there—and never lose.

BY THE THIRD CHALLENGE, Richard was getting curious.

"Is this usual when people inherit?" he asked, stepping around the dead man in the street to clean his sword.

Alec wiped his sleeve across his face. He'd barely had time to register the challenge before Richard struck the final blow. "No, it's my goddamned relatives. Contesting the succession."

"What's to contest? Weren't you always her heir?"

Alec scraped something off the sole of his boot against a corner of a wall. "No, Richard. Did you think I was holding out on you all this time?"

He had, actually.

WHAT EVERYONE WANTED TO KNOW was *Why?* Why this crazy guy, who didn't have enough sense to get out of Riverside when he could, and take his famous boyfriend with him? Was it some kind of a joke? If he didn't want to be a duke, couldn't he just say so?

Not that we didn't enjoy the challenges. Nervous swordsmen from the Hill paid good money to find out where his young lordship might be. We told them where he *might* be. But never where he really was.

SO WHO WAS IT, THEN?" Richard sheathed his sword, but kept his hand on the pommel as he walked.

"No one. She wouldn't name an heir while she lived. Maybe she thought it would make her immortal. Maybe she just couldn't decide."

Climbing the dark, narrow stairs to their rooms, Richard watched with extra caution for signs of intruders. He opened the door first and waited until it was shut behind them to say, "So she died without naming an heir, and it automatically goes to you?"

"No, Richard." Alec flung his robe down on their only chair and said with entirely unjustified elaborate patience, "Haven't you been listening? She did name me. Finally. At the end."

He fished behind *On Human Understanding* and pulled out a letter, heavy with seals.

"See? It's all very official. Chosen, chosen, chosen. Like a prize rosebush at the fair. By a dying woman they probably nagged to death until she just gave them a name to shut them up."

Richard admired the elaborate writing, heavy and black, looped and angled. "So you are now the Duke Tremontaine?"

It was the first time he'd said it aloud. It sounded very strange.

Alec snapped the paper shut, using the seals as ballast.

"Well, that depends, doesn't it?"

"On what?"

"On whether I live to the end of the trial period."

"There's a trial period?"

"Oh, yes. It's open season on me until the thirty days of mourning have passed."

"And then?" he dared to ask.

"It's over. We're safe. I just have to last that long. Then it's not my problem anymore. Or yours."

"But if you don't want the duchy—"

"Who says I don't want it?"

"*Do* you?"

"I want," Alec said, untying Richard's shirt, "to make them sweat. Don't you?"

IT WAS A LITTLE HARDER WHEN THEY STARTED sending down guys we knew. Steffi's kid, Luxe, who'd been so proud when that fancy uptown swordmaster took him on, and then Steffi never shut up about how her kid had finally gotten himself an important job as some noble's own house swordsman, and that's why her boy never came to see her anymore. When Luxe showed up at Rosalie's, she was thrilled. I have to admit he looked good, well fed and strong, dressed in new clothes. They were not any noble's colors, though. We thought he was off duty, but he wasn't. He bought a round for everyone,

and then he said, “So what’s new?” or “What’s happening around here?” or something.

We all looked at each other. He had to know.

“Looking for St Vier?” Rosalie said bluntly. She’d never liked Luxe that much.

Luxe grinned. He had good teeth. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“No reason. Everyone else is. But you just got lucky.”

In they came, St Vier and Alec, walking close together. Alec’s head was up, and he was laughing. St Vier had that half smile, listening to him.

Everyone got quiet, not even trying to pretend they hadn’t been talking about them.

St Vier’s polite. He nodded to the room. Actually, he was checking it out—and as Alec stepped up to the counter and ordered a beer, St Vier grabbed him by the elbow and steered him back.

“Again?” said Alec.

“Again,” his friend said.

Luxe smiled. “St Vier.”

Steffi moved in, all tits and curls. “You remember my boy Luxe, Richard, right? Here he is, come to pay us a visit.”

Luxe didn’t even do her the courtesy of telling her to shut up. He just kept on talking. “Will you take my challenge?”

“On behalf of his lordship, here?” St Vier asked. “Because if you’re just showing off, I’d rather not.”

Luxe straightened up, and you saw the nobleman’s house servant that he’d learned to be. “I bear challenge. To the Tremontaine heir.” He nodded at Alec, who was busy picking at a loose thread on his cuff. “That him?”

St Vier shifted his weight, cutting Luxe off from Alec just a little more. “Don’t try.”

“Guard, then.” Luxe drew. There was sweat on his upper lip already. He had good form, though. People spread out, and the bets got going. I was taking as many as I could, so I missed some of the action. Then Steffi was moaning, “No no no no no no no,” and Rosalie had her arms wrapped around her. St Vier had Luxe pinned to the floor, sweating, his blade at his throat. The throat, not the heart.

St Vier said, “Alec?”

Alec was sweating, too, pushing hair back from his face. “What?”

"Ask him. Ask him who sent him."

We couldn't believe it. If there's one thing swordsmen don't do, it's ask that question. The patron pays, the patron calls the shots and protects whoever's working for him, so you keep your mouth shut. That's the rules.

"I don't care who sent him! They can all go to hell."

"So do I kill him, then?"

Steffi screamed.

"Hell, no," Alec said. "What for?" And turned away.

He walked on out of the tavern, and St Vier followed him. We all stood staring at the man on the floor.

"Shit," Luxe said. He was shaking and he wouldn't get up. "Oh, shit."

THE NEXT DAY, I HAD MY GREAT IDEA. I waited for Alec on the street, not in Rosalie's, where everyone would see us. I waited til I saw him out with his basket to do his marketing, and I went up to him and I said, "Look, here's the thing."

He looked down his long nose at me. Way down. I can't help if I'm short. "Yes," he said, "I can see that."

I ignored the dig. You just have to. I said, "You want a message to someone? Someone up on the Hill, maybe? Something you want to say but not write down?"

He just looked at me. But not in that sneery way. His chin went down a little, listening. He had the weirdest eyes.

"You can trust me." I tried not to talk too fast, which is something people say I sometimes do. But it was hard with those eyes and him not saying anything back. "Say you make them an offer. A hundred royals, a thousand, I dunno; what's it worth to them?" He snorted. "Look, you don't want it; they do. So why not benefit? You save everyone a lot of grief and make a profit. Good for them, good for you, and everyone gets what they want."

He said slowly, "I hadn't thought of that."

Well, of course he hadn't.

"Just say the word," I told him. "I'm your man."

"Are you?"

The way he looked at me then…If I'd ever doubted he was really one of them, I didn't anymore. It wasn't just his eyes, it was his voice. Something

curious and measuring, like he was checking me out for position of third footman on the left or something. *I'm your man.*

That's not how I'd meant it, either. I just meant it the regular way.

"I know you're a fair-minded guy, so I won't even name a price. I just—well, you know where to find me."

He nodded, turned, and walked away.

RICHARD MET ALEC ON THE STAIRS COMING UP. It was too dark for Alec to see how bloody the swordsman's shirt was, but he could smell it.

"Don't go up," Richard said. "There's a dead man in there."

"In *there*?" Alec pointed with his chin to their door at the top of the stairs. He was carrying a basket of fruit. The first cherries were in from the country, and he'd spent far too much on them.

"It's a mess," Richard said. He walked Alec back down the narrow stairs. "I'll tell Marie to clean it up."

Down in the courtyard, Alec could see the corners of the swordsman's mouth were white. "I'll tell her."

Marie was white, too. "I didn't," she said. "I swear."

"Didn't let the poor bastard in? I should think not."

"We know you hate cleaning up blood, Marie. It's all right."

"But who?" she said. "Who told them where you live?"

"Everyone knows where we live," Alec drawled. "It's a wonder they didn't try it before. Maybe they did and got sick of waiting last time. Don't worry about it."

"How much longer?" Richard asked, when she'd gone upstairs with her pail and some rags and sent a boy to find someone to remove the body.

"Seven days," Alec said. "And then they'll stop sending you new toys to play with."

"I don't like them messing up the house."

"Neither does Marie. I'll draw her another bucket of water. She appreciates these little gestures."

"I think," St Vier said, "we'll sleep at Rosalie's tonight."

WHAT WAS I DOING OUT THAT NIGHT? Trying to earn a living, same as everyone else. The job finished early, and I was headed to Rosalie's for a drink. I wasn't trying to spy on anybody. But I saw that guy Alec come out

Rosalie's back door, the one nobody uses, alone. He had a lantern. The moon was good enough for me. Alec was moving fast, but a moment later I saw St Vier come out the same door. He didn't have a light, and I thought he'd catch up to Alec soon enough. But he didn't. St Vier wasn't really dressed, either—shirt unlaced, jacket unbuttoned—though he did have his sword in his hand. He strapped it on as he walked, slowly and quietly, following the man with the lantern.

It didn't take a wizard to know something was up. I should've turned around and gone straight into the tavern, maybe. But I thought, *Who knows? Maybe they'll need backup.* So I followed them.

Alec went to the river, across from the University. *Good,* I thought. *He's finally going back to where he came from!* But he just stood on the bank, looking over. St Vier stayed in the shadows, looking at Alec. When Alec moved closer to the water, St Vier got tense, like he was thinking the beanpole might throw himself in. But then Alec moved on, walking along the embankment, trailing his hand along the low wall like it was some giant pet.

When the wall petered out he swung back into Riverside, passing through the old market, which was pretty much empty except for a few people who'd built themselves a fire to keep out the chill and the spooks til dawn. They glanced up when Alec passed, trying to make themselves small, not to be noticed. He didn't even look. St Vier walked right by them, too, a moment later. I figured it wouldn't hurt to say hello and see if it was anyone I knew, but they weren't too friendly.

It was harder in the little streets to keep behind them. Alec was moving slower. Like it was a bright spring day and he had all the time in the world to get from Rosalie's tavern to his own lodgings. I heard St Vier had killed a man there today.

They didn't go in. Alec leaned his head against the crumbling stone archway to the courtyard. His arm was up over his head, and his fist was clenched. He spread his fingers out slowly, ran them down the outer wall. He backed away slowly from the house, like he didn't want to let go. Even slower he walked down the street, where it was so dark we both would have lost him without the lantern.

Did he know St Vier was following him? How could he not? How could he think he'd get so far in the night alone? And did St Vier know it was me

behind him? He must have. Or maybe not. Maybe everyone was out taking a little midnight walk that just happened to go all around Riverside. All around the places the two of them liked to eat and drink and buy things, make trouble and get out of it, kill and get talked about. All of them. Like a farewell tour.

Alec crossed Riverside, all the way to the Bridge—the good bridge, the big stone one that takes you to the side of the city with all the nice stuff: the excellent shops and pretty little houses, the wide paths by the river, where people go walking under the trees, until you climb all the way up to the Hill, where the nobles in their mansions can enjoy fresh breezes and a really good view. There are some nasty bits, too, with nasty people in them who don't care who your boyfriend is or codes of honor or anything. If Alec was planning to sneak up to Tremontaine House with his lantern in the dark, he'd better be careful.

But the dark was a little less dark now. You could see his bony, ragged form against the sky behind him. He went up to the Bridge, but didn't cross it—didn't even set one foot on it. He just stood there, staring at the city. Then he held his lantern up high, high over his head, like he was showing it to the river, or showing the whole world where he stood. And he goes and throws the whole thing far out into the water.

Alec turned around, then, back to Riverside, back to us. I couldn't see his face, but I heard his voice. "Richard?" he asked, into the graying light.

The funny thing was, he was looking in the wrong direction.

St Vier stepped out of the shadows. "Let's go home."

They walked right past me.

MOST PEOPLE IN RIVERSIDE LOCK THEIR DOORS if they own anything of value, but Richard St Vier had gotten out of the habit. This morning, though, he found the door to their rooms locked tight. They had to go back down to Marie's to get her key.

She handed them the cold old iron. "You'll want to keep this. I'll put a gate over the courtyard entry, too, maybe. Should I?"

"Not yet."

Their rooms were spotless, the old elmwood floor scrubbed almost white. "Like the pages of a book," said Alec. He took a burnt stick from the hearth

and wrote something on the floor with it, then scuffed it out with his foot, leaving a charcoal smear.

Richard stood in the middle of the room. The furniture was off. It had been knocked around during the fight, of course, and then Marie had moved it to do the floor and not put it back exactly right. She'd missed a spot of blood on the wall. He pulled the chaise longue back to its place between the window and the fireplace. The inlaid table Alec had pawned his velvet coat for should be closer to the wall. He remembered the day Alec had reappeared in Riverside, fresh from his last fight with the duchess, groceries in hand and tiny shards of glass still glittering on the shoulders of that coat.

Alec flung himself into their ratty old chaise longue. Stuffing oozed. He twisted uncomfortably, got up, took a book from the pile on the mantelpiece —which Marie had dusted and straightened—and tried the chaise again.

Richard went into the next room, where his opponent had been hiding, waiting. It looked all right, but he hated knowing anyone had been in there. He opened his sword chest. Everything seemed in place. He took out a practice sword and went back to the front room to work. For a while, the room was quiet except for the rhythmic thud of his feet on the floor, the sword on the wall.

Then Alec looked up from the book he hadn't been reading. "Richard," he said, "let's go to Tremontaine House."

"All right." Richard put the sword up. "When?"

"How long will it take you to change your shirt?"

"And you? Are you going to change?"

Alec considered his own frayed cuffs. "No. No, I don't think so."

He pulled on his scholar's robe and then went out the door and down the stairs without looking back.

Richard did not stop to change his shirt; he grabbed the nearest decent sword and followed Alec down the narrow stairs, catching up with him on the landing. Alec didn't say anything; he just kept walking. Walking toward the Bridge. He walked down the narrow lanes where the old houses practically touched each other in perpetual twilight. He walked along the streets where the gutters overflowed, past the lion fountain with the broken nose where women were washing linens.

And then it turned into a story. That's the only way he could describe it.

"Where are you going?" asked Lucy Diver, and when Alec answered "Tremontaine House," Lucy put down her washing and said, "Oh, yeah? Mind if I come, too?" Alec shrugged, *Why not?* and Lucy did.

They walked through the Market Square, and people looked up from their trading in fresh-caught fish and stolen watches.

"Hey, Alec!" Toothless John called out. "I got good trout for you today!"

But Alec didn't stop.

"Where are you going?" John asked, and Lucy answered, "Tremontaine House!" and John fell in with them.

They came upon Fat Rodge and Hal, and "Where are you going?" they asked, and John answered, "Up the Hill," and they came along, too.

They picked up three or four more this way, and after that people just started joining because it was a crowd, and it was a nice day to be going somewhere new.

I WAS ONE OF THE ONES WHO MARCHED THAT DAY, the day that funny kid Alec became the Duke Tremontaine.

A whole big bunch of us parading through Riverside, drunk and sober, some at the end of their day and some just starting out, because everyone likes to be in on the action. The girls were waving ribbons in the air, and everyone was singing something different. St Vier was guarding all of us, like some crazy wedding procession, and other swordsmen joined in, too, making a very nice appearance.

For a guy with a mouth like that on him, Alec was awful quiet. In fact, I don't think he ever said a word. Just kept on walking, a beanpole in black, paying no attention to anyone around him, just walking like he knew if he stopped the whole thing would fall apart. Sometimes we even had to run to keep up with him.

When we got to the Bridge, we kept right on going. We marched through the city, past all the shops and the fancy houses, singing and carrying on, laughing as people fell back out of our way, and we heard them shouting and screaming and calling to each other to run away or to come and see. Some even lined up, cheering. I heard "Riverside!" and "Tremontaine!" and a whole lot else, besides. But we didn't stop. We marched all the way up the broad streets to the Hill, past all those high

walls and gold-and-iron gates, until we came to the biggest and fanciest, the one that was Alec's, and they had to let him in.

We lifted him up on our shoulders and carried him all the way there—over the Bridge, all the way up the Hill to Tremontaine House.

After all, he was one of ours.

The Privilege of the Sword

ELLEN KUSHNER

This book is
for Delia
and always was

Small pow'r the word has,
And can afford us
Not half so much privilege as
The sword does.

—Anon., "The Dominion of the Sword" (1658)

If the old fantastical Duke of dark corners
had been at home, he had lived…
The Duke yet would have dark deeds darkly answered.

—Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, IV.iii; III.ii

All the same, he had no manners then, and he has no manners now, and he never will have any manners.

—Rudyard Kipling, "How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin"

What a gruesome way to treat one's niece.

—James Thurber, *The Thirteen Clocks*

the PRIVILEGE of the SWORD

Part I

TREMONTAINE

chapter I

NO ONE SENDS FOR A NIECE THEY'VE NEVER SEEN before just to annoy her family and ruin her life. That, at least, is what I thought. This was before I had ever been to the city. I had never been in a duel, or held a sword myself. I had never kissed anyone, or had anyone try to kill me, or worn a velvet cloak. I had certainly never met my uncle the Mad Duke. Once I met him, much was explained.

ON THE DAY WE RECEIVED MY UNCLE'S LETTER, I was in the pantry counting our stock of silverware. Laden with lists, I joined my mother in the sunny parlor over the gardens where she was hemming kerchiefs. We did these things ourselves these days. Outside, I could hear the crows cawing in the hills, and the sheep bleating over them. I wasn't looking at her; my eyes were on the papers before me, and I was worrying about the spoons, which needed polishing, but we might have to sell them, so why bother now?

"Three hundred and thirteen spoons," I said, consulting the lists. "We're short three spoons from last time, Mother."

She did not reply. I looked up. My mother was staring out the window and gnawing on one end of her silky hair. I wish I had hair like that; mine curls, in all the wrong ways. "Do you think," she said at last, "that we should have that tree taken down?"

"We're doing silver inventory," I said sternly, "and we're short."

"Are you sure you have the right list? When did we count them last?"

"Gregory's Coming-of-Age party, I think. My hands smelt of polish all through dinner. And he never even thanked me for it, the pig."

"Oh, Katherine."

My mother has a way of saying my name as though it were an entire speech. This one included *When will you* and *How silly* and *I couldn't do without you* all at once. But I wasn't in the mood to hear it. While it must be done and there is no sense shirking, counting silver is not my favorite chore, although it ranks above fine needlework and making jam.

"I bet no one likes Greg there in the city, either, unless he's learned to be nicer to people."

There was a sudden jerky movement as she set her sewing down. I waited to be chastised. The silence became frightening. I looked to see that her hands were clutching the work down in her lap, regardless of what that was doing to the linen. She was holding her head very high, which was a mistake, because the moment I looked I knew from the set of her mouth and the wideness of her eyes that she was trying not to cry. Softly I put down my papers and knelt at her side, nestling in her skirts where I felt safe. "I'm sorry, Mama," I said, stroking the fabric. "I didn't mean it."

My mother twisted her finger in a lock of my hair. "Katie…" She breathed a long sigh. "I've had a letter from my brother."

My breath caught. "Oh, no! Is it the lawsuit? Are we ruined?"

"Quite the contrary." But she didn't smile. The line that had appeared between her brows last year only got deeper. "No, it's an invitation. To Tremontaine House."

My uncle the Mad Duke had never invited us to visit him. It wouldn't be decent. Everyone knew how he lived. But that wasn't the point. The point was that almost since I was born, he had been out to ruin us. It was utterly ridiculous: when he had just inherited vast riches from their grandmother, the Duchess Tremontaine, along with the title, he started dickering over the bit of land my mother had gotten from their parents for her dowry—or rather, his lawyers did. The points were all so obscure that only the lawyers seemed to understand them, and no one my father hired could ever get the better of them. We didn't lose the land; we just kept having to sink more and more money into lawyers, while the land my uncle was contesting went into a trust that made it unavailable to us, along with its revenues, which made it even harder to pay the lawyers…

I was quite small, but I remember how awful it always was when the letters came, heavy with their alarming seals. There would be an hour or two of perfect, dreadful stillness, and then everything would explode. My

father would shout all sorts of things at my mother about her mad family, and why couldn't she control them all, he might as well have married the goosegirl for all the good she did him! And she would cry it wasn't her fault her brother was mad, and why didn't he ask her parents what was wrong with the contract instead of badgering her, and hadn't she done her duty by him? I heard quite a lot of this because when the shouting started she would clutch me to her, and when it was over she and I would often sneak off to the pantry and steal a pot of jam and eat it under the stairs. At the dinner table my father would quarrel with my older brothers about the cost of Greg's horses or Seb's tutors, or what they should plant in the south reach, or what to do about tenants poaching rabbits. I was glad I was too young for him to pay much attention to; only sometimes he would take my face in his big hands and look at me hard, as if he were trying to find out which side of the family I favored. "You're a sensible girl," he'd say hopefully. "You're a help to your mother, aren't you?" Well, I tried to be.

Father died suddenly when I was eleven. Things got much quieter then. And just as suddenly, the lawsuits stopped as well. It was as if the Mad Duke Tremontaine had forgotten all about us.

Then, about a year ago, just when we had begun to stop counting every copper, the letters started coming again, with their heavy seals. It seemed the lawsuit was back.

My brother Sebastian begged to be allowed to go to the city to study law at University, but Seb was needed at home; he was much too clever about land and farming and things. Instead Gregory, who was Lord Talbert now, went to the city to find us new lawyers, and take his place on the Council of Lords. It was expensive having him there, and we were once again without the revenue from my mother's portion. If we didn't sell the spoons, we were going to have to sell some of my father's land, and everyone knows once you start chipping away at your estate, you're pretty much done for.

And now here was the Mad Duke, actually inviting us to the city to be his guests at Tremontaine House. My mother looked troubled, but I knew such an invitation could mean only one thing: an end to the horrible lawsuits, the awful letters. Surely all was forgiven and forgotten. We would go to town and take our place amongst the nobility there at last, with parties and dancing and music and jewels and clothes—I threw my arms

around my mother's waist, and hugged her warmly. "Oh, Mama! I knew no one could stay angry with you forever. I am so happy for you!"

But she pulled away from me. "Don't be. The entire thing is ridiculous. It's out of the question."

"But—don't you wish to see your brother again? If I hadn't seen Greg or Seb for twenty years, I'd at least be curious."

"I know what Davey's like." She twisted the handkerchief in her hand. "He hasn't changed a bit. He fought with our parents all the time…" She stroked my hair. "You don't know how lucky you are, Kitty, to have such a kind and loving family. I know Papa was sometimes harsh, but he did care for all of us. And you and I have always been the best of friends, haven't we?"

I nodded.

"Davey and I were like that. Friends. Good friends, together against the world. We made up games, and protected each other. But people grow up, don't they? You can't stay a child forever. When my parents chose a husband for me, we were—he was—well, Davey just didn't understand that things must change."

"He hated Papa, didn't he?"

"He was only a boy; what did he know? Charles was a neighbor, not some stranger. My parents trusted him and knew he'd take good care of me. Of course I shed a few tears; I was a young girl, afraid to leave my home for the first time. My brother, though—well, he simply could not understand that, in the end, one has a duty to one's family. He never did, and he never will."

She was going to ruin that cloth, but I didn't want to stop her flow of words. A lot had happened in our family that no one had ever explained to me.

"And now it's the same thing all over again!" she cried, ripping the hem without seeing it. "Just when we thought things were about to get better, he went and made them worse, much worse, to please himself and hurt the rest of us. Just the same as now."

She started stabbing at the kerchief with her needle. "How?" I breathed, hoping to still her hands, hoping to keep the words coming. "How is it the same?"

"The duchess," my mother said, her lips tight. She wasn't even seeing me, I could tell; her eyes were on an invisible past when everything had gone wrong before I was born. "Our grandmother, the noble Duchess Tremontaine. Who didn't even come to my wedding; she still wasn't speaking to our mother. But she invited my brother to the city, to stay with her at Tremontaine House. It was his big chance—our big chance—to reconcile with her, to make something of himself. And what did he do? He ran away."

"Where?"

"To University." She bit a thread in half. "Right there in the city, right under the duchess's very nose. Mother was beside herself. Gregory had just been born, and I had to leave him here all alone with your father and the servants to go and tend to her. You know what she was like." I nodded; Grandmother Campion had been terrifying. "Next we heard, he'd run away from University as well, gone to live in some city slum. We were sure he was dead. But he wasn't dead. He was bringing more shame on us by carrying on with a notorious swordsman. It all came out when the duchess found him. I suppose he amused her, because a few years later she died, naming him her heir! Mother wrote him a long letter, and sent him some things, but he never replied."

"Go and see him," I urged her poetically. "Who knows but that he may yet relent, and remember the days of his youth, when you were the best of friends?"

"Katherine Samantha." She looked away from the past, and directly at me. "You have not been listening to what I've been telling you. It's you he wishes to see."

"Me! But—but—Why?"

She shook her head. "Oh, it's too ridiculous even to contemplate."

"Mother." I took both her hands in mine. "You cannot say that and expect me to go on counting silver as if nothing had happened. It is impossible. What does he want to see me about?"

"He says he wants to make a swordsman of you."

I laughed—well, I snorted, actually. If I'd had anything in my mouth, it would have flown across the room. That sort of laugh.

"Just so," she said. "You go live with him and study the sword, and in return he'll not only drop the lawsuits, he'll pay off all our debts, and—well,

he's prepared to be very generous."

I began to see, or thought I did. "He wants me to come to the city. To Tremontaine House," I breathed. "To make our fortune."

She said, "Of course, the thing is impossible."

"But Mother," I said, "what about my duty to my family?"

chapter II

"YOU HAVE NO USE FOR GIRLS. YOU TOLD ME SO YOURSELF."

In a fine room in the Mad Duke Tremontaine's house, a fat and messy young woman sprawled on a velvet chaise longue, one hand buried in a bowl of summer strawberries. Across the room, the Mad Duke examined the back of his chimneypiece for cracks. "Utter incompetents," he grumbled. "They wouldn't know wood-bore from a tick on their dog's ass."

She stuck to the subject. "Neither would girls."

"I *do* have no use for girls. Not that way; not with ones I'm related to, anyway." He popped out of the fireplace to leer briefly, but getting no response went back and continued, "You should be grateful. Or, as the only respectable female of my acquaintance, you are the one I would have to impose upon to escort my niece to dances and things when she gets here."

The homely woman, whose name was Flavia, but whom everyone thought of as That Ugly Girl of the Duke's, put a large berry in her mouth, wiped her fingers on the velvet of the chaise and talked around it. "Any titled lady whose husband owes you money would be delighted to take your

niece in hand, if only to show you how it's done properly and try to instill some gratitude in you." She licked juice off her lips. "You know, I've been meaning to ask you: why do you talk so much, when half of what you say is utter crap?"

"To keep you on your toes," he answered promptly. "How would you like it if everything I said suddenly started making sense? It would only confuse you."

Unfolding his long body from the guts of the fireplace, the duke thrust his ruffled cuffs under his fat friend's nose for inspection. "Would you say these are dirty?"

"*Dirty* is not the word I would use." She stared at the lace. "That implies that somewhere under the carbon there exists white linen in its original state. But I think an alchemical transformation has been effected here."

"At last!" He lunged for the bellpull. "I shall have to document it." His fingers left black smudges on the embroidered fabric. "You will be amazed to learn that I, too, have read Fayerweather. You have, as usual, completely bollixed his concept of Original State: it has nothing to do with alchemy."

"Did I quote Fayerweather?"

"No. You eviscerated him, and threw his carcass to the geese."

The duke's summons was answered by a stocky boy. Everything about him was middling: his height, weight, color and curl of hair, skin, ears, even his deportment, caught as it was in the middle between a boy's awkwardness and a young man's strength. His arms were a little long, but that was all.

"Isn't he wonderful?" the duke asked fondly.

The Ugly Girl threw a strawberry at the boy, which he failed to catch; nor did he run after it to pick it up when it rolled into a corner. "Dear one," she said to the duke, "you could surround yourself with much prettier company than those present."

"I do," he replied. "But they have a tendency to think too highly of themselves. So I get rid of them. Over and over and over and over," he sighed. "Marcus," he told the boy, "get me a clean shirt."

"Yes, my lord."

The duke pulled the one he was wearing over his head. "And have this one examined—the cuffs—for alchemical transformation."

"Yes, my—" The boy's face bent and broke into a laugh. "Do you mean it?"

The duke tilted his head to one side. "Hmm. Do I? I'm not sure. It was *her* idea. *Do* I mean it?"

The Ugly Girl rolled onto her back, gazing nearsightedly at the elaborate blur of the sculpted ceiling above her. "You never mean anything."

When the boy had left the room, she said approvingly, "He's got brains. It's funny how you can always tell."

"Like calling to like." It was as close to a compliment as the duke ever came; she wisely ignored it. "Well, as you pointed out, I hardly chose him for his beauty."

"I'm surprised you chose him at all. He lacks the aura of great wickedness, or great innocence. You like extremes."

"I do." The duke helped himself to the strawberries; they were his, after all. He ate them one at a time, in the manner of one who is not used to plenty.

Making sure that her fingers were well licked and dried, the Ugly Girl went to take a book from the pile on the mantelpiece. She sat by the window reading her treatise on mathematics, ignoring the duke as he received and donned his new shirt, received and interviewed an informant (who was not offered strawberries), received and made fun of a small but very ugly lamp meant as a bribe and finally went back to his fireplace excavations.

Then she lifted her head and announced, "I have thought of and discarded many conceivable reasons for you to have sent for your niece. It therefore remains that your reason is inconceivable."

"To any but me, of course."

She waited an appreciable amount of time before giving in and asking, "May one hear it?"

"I intend to make a swordsman of her."

The Ugly Girl slammed the book shut. "That tears it. That is idiotic. Possibly the stupidest thing that I have ever heard you say."

"Not at all." The duke could appear quite elegant when he chose to. He did so now, lounging in his wide shirtsleeves against the ornate mantel. "I must have protection. Someone I can trust. Of course I have a lot of hired

guards—but I am paying them. And I do not like the constant company of strangers."

"You could hire handsome ones. They need not be strangers long."

"I do not think," drawled the duke at his most stickily aristocratic, "that that is very appealing. And yet—I must constantly be protected from the sudden sword-thrust, the irrevocable challenge. There are so many people around who imagine their lives would be miraculously improved by my removal. So: who better to fulfill the protective function than family?"

"Surely you have nephews?"

"Whole flotillas of them. So what?"

Not being the sort to throw a book, she pounded her fist on her cushion. "*So what,* indeed! Not content to find freaks, you must create them as well?"

The duke did not try, ever, to hide his contented smile. "I do not make the rules," he said creamily. "This annoys me, and so I comfort myself by breaking them. She is my favorite sister's—my only sister's—youngest child. I shall ensure that she has a distinctive and useful trade to follow, should the family fortunes fail. Or should the Good Marriage that is every noble's daughter's ambition prove elusive or less than satisfactory. A distinctive and a useful trade…it is, alas, too late for her older brothers to learn anything, really. And, anyway, I think one sword in the family is enough, don't you?"

"Crap," she said. "Utter crap. You must really hate your sister a lot."

I HAD ALWAYS KNOWN I MUST GO TO THE CITY, BECAUSE that is where one goes to make one's fortune these days. Men go there to take their seat on the Council of Lords and meet influential people; girls go to make a brilliant match with a man of property and excellent family. We had scraped together the funds to send my eldest brother, but apart from writing the occasional letter complaining about the food, the streets, the weather and the people, Gregory didn't seem to be doing much. I wasn't surprised. Greg always lacked dash.

I, on the other hand, while not quite pretty, look very nice when I get dressed up, and neighbors at parties have been known to admire my

dancing. I always remember the steps, and never tread on toes or bump into others. Before my uncle's letter came, I had often tried to encourage my mother to send me to town to try my luck at finding a good match. But no matter how I begged and reasoned, it always ended with her saying, "Kitty, you're too young," which was ridiculous, since she was married herself at fifteen. If I explained that a dazzling City Season was completely different from one's mother picking a convenient neighbor, she'd say, "Well, but what man would have you with your portion tied up in a lawsuit?"

"A very rich one, of course, who cares nothing for my sad estate! I will enchant him. He will love me for my winning ways. And for my connections. I'm very well connected, aren't I? Your brother's still a duke, even if he is mad and dissolute. That counts, you said."

"But think how much more enchanting you will be when you have reached your full height, and gotten all willowy and elegant, dressed up in long gowns with real lace—"

"And a train! I must have a train, for staircases, mustn't I, Mother? And a peacock feather fan, and shoes with glittery buckles and a velvet cape." I knew that was all I needed to break anyone's heart. Let me appear on the right staircase just once in a velvet cape, and I was a made woman.

Now I was headed for one of the most glorious houses in the city, at the invitation of Duke Tremontaine himself. The lawsuit would be withdrawn, my dowry restored, if not, indeed, doubled. I was sure he had a staircase.

So there I was in the carriage, hurtling toward the city, my expectations high. The letter had included all sorts of bizarre rules I was to follow once I got there, like not writing or receiving any letters from family for six months, but that wasn't forever. I had no doubt that I was doing the right thing, and that all would be well. My uncle might have quarreled with the rest of the family, but he'd never met me. Of course I would have to prove myself to him at first; that's why he had set up the rules. I was going to be tested for courage, for endurance, for loyalty and other virtues. Once I had demonstrated my worthiness, I would be revealed to the world in my true guise and reap the rewards. The masked ball would turn to wedding feast, the silly comedy to glorious romance with myself as heroine. First disguise, then revelation. That was how it worked. What else could the story possibly be?

It was not at all the way I had ever planned to go to the city, but at least I was going. If my mad uncle wanted me to learn to use a sword, fine, as long as I would also attend balls and meet eligible men. The important thing was, he was inviting me to join his household. The Duke Tremontaine wanted me by his side, and the world was open to me.

chapter III

A YOUNG GIRL STEPS OUT OF A TRAVELING CARRIAGE into a courtyard already in shadow. But all above her, the house's high windows glitter with the last golden rays of the sun.

She is wrapped in a simple grey wool traveling cloak. As she looks up at the house's glorious facade of honey-colored stone and many-paned glass, she furls a corner of the cloak like a ballgown, and slowly pivots in place.

MY UNCLE THE MAD DUKE LOOKED ME UP AND DOWN.

"You aren't very tall," he said.

Beyond his face I could see his back reflected in the convex mirror over the fireplace, so that he swallowed up the room. "No, sir."

It was a delicious room, painted blue and white with touches of gold; very modern, very airy, filled with pictures on the walls and curios scattered on little tables that seemed to have no other purpose but to hold them. Tall glass doors opened onto gardens overlooking the river.

He said, “This is Tremontaine House. It is very elegant. I inherited it from my grandmother, the last duchess.” When he mentioned her, the planes of his face hardened in distaste. I recognized the expression from many family dinners of our own. My uncle’s face kept turning familiar, as though I’d known him all my life. A tilt of the head, a flick of the eye—I knew him—and then it was gone, and I was confronting a fearsome stranger. He had my mother’s long brown hair, which looked very odd. I thought only students had long hair. He’d been a student once, but surely that was long ago.

“But you need not dress for dinner,” the duke said. “Nor for much of anything, really.” He drifted off, his attention caught by a china statuette on a little table. I had never been so effortlessly ignored; it was as if I’d disappeared, as if his attention could only hold one thing at a time. He picked the china up, and brought it close to his eye to examine its gilded curlicues in the light.

“I did bring nice dresses,” I said. He’d almost beggared us, but he needn’t think I could not dress for dinner.

“Did you?” my uncle asked idly. “Why?”

“Why?” I repeated. “To—well, to wear.” His attention returned to the statue in his hands. The duke had very long, graceful hands; just the sort I’ve always wanted, only bigger, and studded with jeweled rings: a whole fortune, riding on one hand. This ill-mannered, well-dressed man, the monster of the family stories, was like nothing I’d ever seen before. I had no idea what he was going to do next—and, I reminded myself, I mustn’t anger him. The family fortunes were at stake. But how to make him like me? I should try being more modest, and display maidenly virtue.

“I’m sure they’re not in style,” I said humbly, “but I could make my dresses over, if someone will show me. I do know how to sew, although I’m not very accomplished.”

He finally turned his head and looked at me. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. Dresses. You won’t be needing any.”

Finally! I thought. I’d been right about one thing: the duke was going to dip into his coffers to provide me with a whole new wardrobe. I remembered my manners and said, “Thank you. That’s very generous of you.”

His long mouth quirked in a half-smile. "We'll see about that. Anyhow, I've arranged for your training to begin tomorrow. You will be living here at Tremontaine House for a while. I don't like it here. I'll be at the Riverside house. Unless I change my mind. I've got you a ladies' maid, and a teacher…and there are books and things. You won't be bored." He paused, and added coolly, "And if anyone tries to bother you—just tell them I've said not to."

I was gone again; I could see it on his face. He subsided into an armchair. How was I going to charm him with my winning ways if he wouldn't even look at me? Of no use now, the pretty speeches I'd planned in the carriage mile after mile. I stared at the elegant figure. It didn't seem rude, since by his lights I wasn't there at all. The duke had ivory-pale skin, long brown hair and long, thinly-lidded eyes and a long, rather pointed nose. He was perfectly real: I could see the fine lines in the corners of his eyes and mouth, hear him breathe, feel him shift his weight when he moved. But he was still like something in a dream. My uncle the Mad Duke.

He looked up, surprised to find me still there. "I should think," he said, in a slow, drawling purr, "that you would want to go to your room now…" It was one of the most unpleasant things an adult had ever said to me, awash in surprised scorn: "…after the carriage ride, and having to talk to me."

I risked a smile, in case he was joking. But he did not smile back.

"I don't know where it is," I finally said.

He waved one arm through the air. "Neither do I. Looking over the river, I think: it might smell a bit in summer, but the view is better." He reached out and found a bellpull. "What was your name, again?"

If he hadn't seemed simply not to care, I might have lost my temper. Still: "Campion," I said icily. "Like yours. It's Katherine Samantha Campion Talbert, in full."

He was seeing me again. The duke leaned toward me. His eyes were green, fringed with dark lashes. For the first time, his face was edged with humor. "I have been the Duke Tremontaine for something like fifteen years now," my uncle said. I didn't see what he found funny about that. "Do you know what my real name is?"

It seemed important to know it. As if, by knowing it, I might prove to him that I was real. Put all his names together, and I might come to some understanding that would tell me what he wanted.

I stared back at him. As if we were mirrors of each other, I felt curiosity, and fear, and excitement—and did not know whether those feelings were his, or my own.

"I know two of them," I said. *Campion*, and the one my mother had called him. "Three, if you count Tremontaine. I can ask my mother for the rest."

"No, you can't. Not for six months, anyway." The duke swung himself round in the chair, hooking his long legs over one arm in the graceless sprawl of a child settling down with a book. "Don't you read your contracts before you sign them?"

"I couldn't sign. I'm not of age."

"Ah, of course. Your family took care of all that for you." He swung back around to face me, with an expression on his face that made me feel cold all over. "Do you understand the terms?" he demanded. "Did she even tell you? Or did they just send you here like some sacrificial goat to buy me off?"

I met his fierce gaze, although I hated doing it. "I know about the swords," I told him, "and the six months. I have to do what you say, and wear the clothes you give me. Of course they told me. I'm not a goat."

"Good." He swung away, satisfied.

A very handsome man with short blond curls and a snub nose came into the room. He walked right past me without a glance, and leaned over my uncle's chair. He leaned down farther and farther, and my uncle reached up one arm and put it behind the man's head, and pulled him down farther still.

There was no mistaking the meaning of that kiss. This was one, just one of the many reasons my uncle the Mad Duke was not considered fit to know. I could not stop looking.

And I saw the beautiful man as he came up for air cast me a triumphant glance.

He murmured to the duke so I could hear, "Having truck with serving girls, this time?" I tugged at my dress to smooth it. It was not cheap cloth by any means, even if it was plain.

The duke hauled himself up in the chair to a level nearer dignity. "I am dismayed, Alcuin," he said in that unpleasantly smooth voice, "that you do not immediately note the resemblance. This is my niece, my only sister's

youngest and dearest child. She will be staying here awhile, so you had better keep a civil tongue around her, or you will not be."

"I *beg* your pardon," said the beautiful Alcuin. "I see it now, of course—a certain, ah, cruelty about the mouth…"

It took all my self-control to keep from wiping my mouth. The duke said, "Alcuin, you're not very bright. You're just nice to look at. I suggest you play your strongest suit."

The beautiful man dropped his eyes like a maiden. "Certainly, sir, if it pleases you. Will you be my master at cards, as in other things?"

"Always," said the duke dryly; "and I'm doing you a favor." Then they started kissing again.

I went and yanked the bellpull myself. Whatever it produced next, it could not be worse than Alcuin.

A boy slipped into the room like a shadow. He nodded at me, but addressed the busy duke: "My lord. Fleming asked me to remind you that your guests will begin arriving in two hours' time, and do you really want to wear the blue velvet tonight when it's this warm?"

My uncle disentangled himself from Alcuin. "Guests? What guests?"

"I knew Your Grace would say that," the boy answered with perfect equanimity. I wanted to laugh, and I thought he did, too. "You invited the poet Almaviva to read his new work here tonight. And you've invited a great many people who don't like poetry, and a sprinkle of ones who do. It's not really a fair fight."

"Oh." My uncle turned to me. "Do you like poetry, Lady Katherine?"

"Some," I managed to answer.

"Then you must swell the ranks of the believers. Can you drink?"

"*What?*"

"Can you drink a great deal of wine without behaving like an idiot?"

"Certainly," I lied.

"Good. Then go have a bath and all that. Don't rush: it'll be hours before they all get here so we can eat. Marcus, tell me, did Betty ever show up?" he asked the boy.

"Oh, yes: she's in the kitchen, practicing her curtsey."

"Well, she can practice it up here. I expect," my uncle said to me, "your room will be wherever they've put your bags. Someone will know."

BETTY PRACTICING HER CURTSEY WAS A TERRIBLE sight to see. She had each separate move in the right sequence, but getting them to flow together seemed beyond her skill. She tugged her skirts out to each side of her. She crooked her knees. She came perilously near the ground. Then she did it again. And again; but it was never very convincing. Short and fat with middle age and scarlet with embarrassment, she resembled a quaking beet-pudding about to collapse in on itself.

"My lady," she stammered, "forgive me—there's a right way to do these things, I know—and I'll begin as I mean to go on, just the way you like it…"

"Thank you," I said, in an agony of impatience; "yes, thank you."

But she kept right on going: "You'll get satisfaction from me this time, my lady, and no messing about with the master, not this time, not this one, bless his boots—"

Finally I gave up and just said it: "Please, could you show me my room?"

"Of course," she panted, nearly worn out with curtseys; "that's what I'm here for, isn't it?" I handed her my cloak, in hopes it would steady her. "Of course," she said. "Of course, my lady."

She didn't look as if she could balance much more than the traveling cloak. I picked up my other small things myself. "My room," I repeated. "Please."

"Yes, well, it's a great big house, this one, isn't it? So many doors you don't know where you are—not like the Riverside house, well, that one's big too, but different; here everything looks the same…"

My heart misgave me as I followed her up the sweeping staircase (it was, in fact, the Perfect Staircase of my dreams, but I was too busy handling Betty to notice. Poor woman, I thought; trying to make a good impression and not quite equipped for it! I had considerable sympathy for her, after what I'd just been through).

"Now I know it's this way," she repeated as we rounded the same corridor a third time. But at last the door stood open to the right place.

There were my trunks in the corner, looking especially shabby in the glory that was my room at Tremontaine House. A huge bed with gauzy curtains, just right for the time of year; a painted wardrobe set off perfectly against the pale butter-yellow of the walls; prettily framed pictures and

vases of flowers…and the whole reflected in the curly gilded mirror that hung over the marble fireplace.

Betty looked at the room, looked at me, attempted another curtsey and fell flat on her bum. When I leaned over to help her up, I found that my sympathy had been misplaced. Her breath smelt like a drover's on payday.

It was too much. My rich uncle had hired me a drunkard, a slovenly woman from who knows where, to serve as my first very-own lady's maid!

I looked at her red, babbling face, at my bags, at all of it reflected in the mirror (including my own shocked face and travel-frizzled hair) and burst into miserable tears.

"There now, my lady." And the creature had her arms around me. "There now." I let her hold me while I sobbed my heart out on the drunkard's warm breast.

MY ROOM DID INDEED LOOK OUT ONTO THE RIVER, and into the hills beyond, where the sun was finally setting. That morning it had found me waking in a strange inn on the road, surrounded by strangers. What a long day it had been! I leaned as far as I could over the balcony—*my* balcony—drinking in the sight. For natural beauty, the view from my room was not a patch on the rolling hills of home, the long vistas and sudden curves. No one could get lost in *these* hills, or tired walking along that river. But still they seemed far more exciting. And below me stretched a shadowy garden, suggestive of hedges and statues and paths one could, perhaps, get lost in. I watched as it all went blue and cold, and stars began to come out in the distance.

My huge white bed seemed to glow with its own light. I lay on its downy luxury, just for a moment—and woke to pitch darkness, and a thud against my bedroom door, and footsteps in the hall, and laughter.

Wide awake, I pulled an overdress on over my wrinkled chemise, and peeked out into the hall. A candle on a stand flared in the draft from my door. A man and a woman, whispering and laughing, were running down the hall toward its light, their inky shadows smeared out along the carpet behind them. I turned the other way, toward the stairs, where most of the noise was coming from. There were laughter and shouts, and the strains of

string music flowed remarkably placid under the revelers. The party was in full cry.

I had no idea where Betty was, or how to get her to help me dress. I struck light to a candle, and picked out a green overdress that had covered deficiencies in the past; unplaited and combed out my hair, and knotted it up with a couple of pins, and clasped my coral necklace around my neck. My dove-grey slippers were nowhere in evidence, so I had to wear the apple-green, even though they did not match the dress. But I have noticed that, in large crowds, no one looks at anyone else's feet. I'd be all right if I could just get down the staircase unseen.

I paused at the top of the stairs to examine the scene below. People were spread out across the great hall; they looked like badly arranged pieces on its gameboard squares of black and white marble. They seemed to be just the spillover from the crowded receiving rooms beyond the double-doors.

I did my best to drift inobtrusively down the stairs. I was terribly hungry; there might be food beyond the doors. The people all looked very grand—*gaudy*, my mother would have said—in rich fabrics and jewels and lace and ruffles. Bobbing amongst them was a dyed ostrich feather, elegantly curled over a sleek, dark head, almost like a little hat. The head turned to me, and suddenly I was looking right into the eyes of a girl my own age. She darted forward, and seized my hands in hers.

"Isn't this *fun*?" she said. Her cheeks were pink, her blue eyes sparkled, and she wore a very good pair of pearl earrings.

"I've only just arrived. I came today, from the country."

"And already you're invited to all the wickedest parties! But I can tell that you are very, very good; I can always tell about people—aren't you just a little bit terrified, being *here*?" She gave a theatrical shudder. "Of course, the old duchess had exquisite taste; that's really why I wanted to come, to see the house, you know. Although the duke's parties are events all their own—the ones at Tremontaine House—not the Other Place—we wouldn't go *there*, of course." My new friend flashed a smile at the whole room. "Isn't it *grand*?"

I could not really see much for all the people. I noticed a cunning little pair of diamond buckles flashing by on someone's feet—or maybe they were paste, I couldn't tell. I wished I had a pair.

"Oh, yes!" I breathed.

She put her arm around my waist. "I just know we are going to be the best of friends. Where is your escort? I came with my brother Robert—the truth is," she pulled me a little closer in; "I made him bring me. He didn't want to. He said it wasn't any place for me. But I said if he did not I would tell our parents the true reason he needed the advance on his allowance. *He* told them he'd given the money to a poor friend who needed it—they encourage us to be generous—but I knew it was really because he'd spent it all on a duel over Lavinia Perry, which is silly, because she's almost a cousin. I wouldn't fall in love with a cousin, would you?"

"Oh, no!"

I had been in the city only a few hours, and already I had a friend—someone whose brother hired swordsmen, and who admired me for getting into dangerous parties. I felt very happy as she circled my waist with her arm. My new friend was shorter than I; the feather tickled my cheek.

"So…you're just up from the country. This must all seem very strange to you—although one wouldn't know it, you have such natural grace. And of course you will be at all the dances. I'm sure to see you there—we will have such fun, searching out beaux together!" She was leading me out of the press, to a corner where we could be fully absorbed in each other.

"Do you know, I've already received flowers from—an admirer!"

I clutched her arm. "Oh, *who*? Is he here?"

"No, not here; this isn't the sort of place he would be seen at. I shall get a dreadful scolding from him if he hears about it." She tossed her head, looking pleased. "But next week…Will you be at the Godwins' ball?"

"I—don't know. I don't believe we've been invited yet."

My elegant friend said, "But I feel sure that Lydia Godwin would dote on you, if only she knew you as I do! I shall speak to her. She is such a dear friend of mine. Perhaps you could come in our party, with your brother. Or was it your cousin?"

"Cousin?"

"With your escort—the one who brought you here."

"Oh. It's my—uncle."

"Oh." She frowned briefly but prettily. "Not one of those boring old married men who only comes to parties to play cards?"

"No, I—don't think he's married. I mean, he isn't. He's very elegant."

"Perhaps you'll introduce us." She pulled away for a moment, to fish in her beaded reticule for a little engraved card. "You must call on me tomorrow." She laughed happily, indicating the throng of revelers: "Not too early, of course!" I had no idea what time it really was. Close to midnight, surely. No one at this party would be up early tomorrow.

I pocketed the card. "I will come, if it's not being a bother," I said shyly, picturing a disaster, with no one home. But she squeezed my hand in hers. "Yes, yes, you must! Then you can meet my brother Robert in decent circumstances—maybe even turn his head away from the Perry chit!"

Was that all it took to get beaux—just meeting friends' brothers? This was going to be easier than I'd thought! I said, "I have no card, not yet—we don't need them at home, everyone knows everyone else. But let me introduce myself—"

"No, let me. It's much more decent," a voice announced from above. "This is my niece, the Lady Katherine Samantha Campion Talbert." My friend was staring, rather pale, over my head, at the tall duke dressed in black. He turned all the pink and silver and powder blue and turquoise in the room to sugar candy. Even my friend's delicious feather looked addled. He said, "And you're a Fitz-Levi. I can tell by the nose."

She sank down in a very lovely curtsey, with her head bowed to hide her flaming cheeks. "My Lord Duke."

My uncle looked down at the feather. "Fitz-Levi…hmmm…I don't remember inviting you. Marcus will know—" His eyes scanned the room, presumably for the boy Marcus. From what I had seen this afternoon, the duke didn't remember having invited anyone. But I could hardly tell her so at this moment. She flashed me a haunted look, pressed my hand once more and fled. By the time my uncle looked down again, she was gone.

He looked curiously at me, as though I had performed a conjuring trick.

"What happened?"

"You frightened her," I told him.

He shrugged. "Well. At least you're still here. Let's get something to eat. Are you hungry?"

I was ravenous. "Yes, please. But—why did you say that, about her nose?"

"What about her nose?"

"You said she was ugly."

"Did I?" He considered for a moment. "I suppose I did. I'd better make her an apology, then. I'll have Marcus send her some flowers."

"Don't!" I exclaimed quickly. "You'll get her in trouble."

He looked at me again with great curiosity. "What do you care?"

All the while he had been maneuvering us out of the hall and off to a side room where tables were spread with food and drink.

"By the way," he said absently, "those shoes don't match that gown."

He handed me a plate piled with strawberries, bonbons, smoked fish and asparagus.

"Ah!" he said. "Finally. Someone to talk to."

The duke was looking with great delight at a large, ugly woman coming toward us across the room. Her complexion was muddy; her hair was chopped like badly mown hay, and of the same rough color and texture. It was hard to tell how old she was; older than I, and younger than Tremontaine, I would guess. Under her shapeless dress, her big body looked thick and without contours. She couldn't be a serving maid; any of them would take pains to present a better appearance. He had terrified my friend with the lovely feather, but was smiling warmly at this troll-like apparition. The corners of his eyes crinkled, which is how you can tell whether someone is really smiling, or just curving their lips.

The ugly woman stumped up to us. "Is this the niece?"

"This is Lady Katherine. She's not very tall, but I think she'll grow."

"How do you do?" I said to her, trying to restore myself to my rightful place in the situation.

"Hello," she said to me. She nodded to the room. "What do you think?"

It was not a question I, or anyone else, could answer. She didn't seem to realize it. I reached for the safety of the commonplace: "It's very nice."

"Oh." The ugly woman nodded, as if that told her all she needed to know about me. She seized a bonbon from my plate and bit it in half. "*Ig,*" she objected. "Peppermint." She began to drop the other half back onto my plate, realized what she was doing just in time before she did it and cast about for somewhere else to bestow the offending morsel.

My uncle the Mad Duke was watching her, vastly diverted, and not offering to help. I realized I was watching her with the same fascination. It was not right. "How was the poetry?" I asked.

"Brilliant." "Awful," they said at the same time.

"It depends on your perspective."

"It depends on your brains."

"The most discerning brain could find nothing to catch and hold on to in those babblings."

"What—the articulation of the *soul* holds no interest for you?"

"As a matter of fact, it doesn't."

I wished I had not missed the poetry. I had thought a great deal about my soul in the past year.

"One wonders, then," the duke said to her, "why you are here at all, since you don't like poetry, and you don't know how to dress for a party."

"I come, of course, for the food. Here." She held out her hand, with the squashed and sticky half a bonbon. I could actually watch him making up his mind whether or not to take it. From his sleeve the duke pulled out a clean handkerchief. He pincered the candy in its folds, and turned to a passing gentleman who, at the touch of the duke's hand on his arm, stopped with a pleased expression.

"Furnival," the duke said engagingly, "I was wondering if you could take care of this for me?"

He didn't even watch to see what the man did with it.

"Have you seen Marcus?" he asked his ugly friend.

"Yes, he was stopping some people in the Violet Room from climbing the curtains."

"What for?"

"They were not professionals."

"Oh."

I could see my uncle the Mad Duke eyeing the asparagus on my plate. To forestall them making any further inroads on my supper, I picked up a green spear myself, and ate it as best I could without a fork. It suddenly occurred to me that asparagus was not in season.

I ate another. I realized that my nerves were partly hunger. I couldn't remember the last thing I'd eaten; maybe some bread on the road. I had a vision of it always being like this: a house without rules, without regular meals, one that came alive only when it was full of guests, a house whose inmates had to inhabit the party world just to get something to eat. Impossible—or so I hoped. But it was even harder to imagine the mundane, us sitting down to dinner together and discussing the events of the day:

what lands needed grazing, what room airing out and what servants correcting—I was suddenly brutally homesick. As if I'd eaten something tainted, I would gladly have sicked up this whole new life to get back the old. *Stop it,* I told myself sternly. I would not cry. Not here, not now—not at all. This was the world I'd wanted: the city, the parties, the glitter and gallants, fine clothes and rare company.

It would be better in the morning.

The Mad Duke had drifted off to make someone else's life miserable. The ugly woman was gone in his wake like a seagull following a ship to scoop up what amusement he let fall.

I filled another plate, made myself small in the folds of a curtain, ate resolutely, and then found myself so tired there was nothing to do but wend my way back up the impressive stairs. My new friend was nowhere in sight; she'd probably gotten her brother Robert to take her home. I felt the little square of cardboard in my pocket, reassuring like a talisman. By some miracle, I found the door to my own room. The noises of the party roared around me like the sea.

chapter IV

IN THE MORNING, THERE WAS CHOCOLATE.

Betty seemed recovered from the previous day's excesses. She must not have been working the party. The tray barely rattled as she set it down by the bed, and a heavenly rich scent filled the room.

I got up at once to engage with the little pot of bitter chocolate, set out with an entire jug of hot cream, as much sugar as I should care to put into it and, oh, the loveliest china cup to mix it in! I wished my mother were there to share it with me. I poured slowly, watching the cream swirl in the cup. It made the confusions and indignities of last night seem a little more worth it; I felt even better when Betty said, "And your new clothes have come, too."

The chocolate was marvelous, but I gulped it down, assuring myself, There will be more again tomorrow, and tomorrow, and again the day after that. I was eager to get to the brown paper parcels piled at the foot of the bed. I unknotted the string myself, being careful to put it by to be used again. Fine white linen, some heavier blue; a little lace, good…no silk, no velvet, but maybe I would be fitted for ballgowns later. I shook out the blue: it was a tight, short linen jacket. Not a fashion I'd seen before; maybe a riding coat? It had a skirt to match—no, it was breeches. Breeches that buttoned up on either side, with a flap in the front.

I frowned. "Betty, are you sure these are for me?"

"Oh, yes, my lady. The duke sent them."

"But they're men's clothes. I can't put these on."

"Oh, don't worry about that." She chuckled. "I've helped a few fellows in and out of those, to be sure. I can dress you up all right and tight."

"But—but I can't wear these!"

"Why not, dearie?"

"They're not—they've got—"

She unrolled stockings, white neck-cloths still in need of ironing, vests and jackets with heavy buttons and shirts with loose sleeves.

"See? They're made specially to your measure sent beforehand, my dear; they'll fit a treat."

I could hardly bear to touch them. It wasn't that I'd never handled men's things before; I've mended my brothers' often enough. But these were for me. I was to dress myself in what men wear. Stockings, neck-cloths, vests and jackets, with heavy buttons and loose sleeves—they were all wrong.

I said as calmly as I could, "They're very nice things. But I will not wear them today. Please take out my blue flowered gown, and the yellow petticoat—"

"Oh, no, my lady. You're to put these on right away, and go to your lesson."

"Lesson?" I said sharply, remembering things like sketching and arithmetic, the lessons I'd had at home until we had to let my governess go, but doubting that was what she meant.

"Yes, that's right; a proper swordmaster coming all the way to Tremontaine House, just to teach you."

I felt my bargain closing in on me, tighter than neck-cloths and hard-buttoned jackets.

"Not today—surely not today, not yet—"

But of course it was today. He had told me it was. The duke owned me now, and I had agreed to it, weeks ago.

"I shall wear them in the house," I said firmly, "if it pleases him. For my lessons." But that, I secretly promised myself, was all.

So I let her pull the shirt over my head—clean, crisp linen that would have made the loveliest chemise!—and then the breeches—the buttons pulling closed flaps that were all that stood between me and the world, and nothing to hide my legs from anyone's eyes but the short hang of the jacket and the coarse stockings that revealed in outline everything they covered. The jacket buttoned tightly; it was well tailored, flattening my breasts and clinging around my arms. Men's clothing gripped me in places I did not want, showed me in ways I could not like, claimed me with strange bindings and unbindings.

I stood trembling, like a young horse being broken to saddle, as Betty's fingers did the final buttons up. I would not look in the mirror. I couldn't bear to see myself transformed into something neither boy nor girl. Was this what my uncle wanted? I hoped he would be satisfied, then!

Betty drew out a blue velvet ribbon, smiling conspiratorially as if it were a sugar cake. It was for my hair, to tie it back in a queue. I let her do it: wearing my hair unbound was not going to change me back.

"Now you're all ready for your lesson. I'll show you the practice-room, and by the time you're done, I'll have all these nice things tidied up and put away."

I had left my last night's party gown spread out upon the chair. Before she could collect it, I snatched from its pocket the pasteboard card my

friend had given me, and stowed it well away in my jacket, a little piece of comfort nestling there.

When I moved, no swing of petticoats surrounded me. I had lost the protection of full skirts, the support of boned bodice. There was nothing for my hands to hide in. I felt the air on my legs as I moved. Cloth covered my skin, but still I was naked, exposed. Anyone could look at me, and see almost all of me!

A plum-colored cape peeked out of the brown paper; in desperation, I seized it and wrapped it around myself. At least it covered my knees.

"No, no, my lady, you won't need to be going out of doors, His Grace has had a whole room made over, just for your practice."

But I clutched the cape tight around myself. And so we ventured through the halls of Tremontaine House, Betty uncertain, as always, of where we were going, and I doing all I could to keep from looking in mirrors. It wasn't easy. Frames were all over the gilded corridors, startling on walls and sudden turns; sometimes the frames contained still, painted pictures, and sometimes glass reflecting a window, a staircase or my own pale face. But even when I didn't look, I knew. I was dressed as a man. I was wearing men's clothes. They were like men's eyes looking at me; like men's eyes touching me. The cape came to just below my knees; if I'd let go of it, it would have swirled very nicely; it was well cut and full. But I held it tightly, like a blanket wrapped against the cold.

Betty kept up a frantic babble which I barely took in: she was grateful to the duke, unworthy of the position, knew a thing or two about ladies and never would mess with their husbands now, no, not if you forced her at swordspoint—

"Here." At last she stopped. "It's the double-doors with the wet rabbits on them." Well, it was a reasonable description of the artfully painted woodland storm scene. Before she could fling them open, I knocked.

"Yes!" a man shouted. "Hurry up!"

He was standing in the middle of the huge, sunlit room. A thickset, muscled man, half-clothed, wearing only breeches and an open-collared shirt. He had a full black beard and bristling mustaches, like nothing I'd ever seen.

"How? How?" he demanded. "You are cold, you wear your bed-blanket?"

My fingers unclenched from the folds of the cloak. I let it fall to the floor. The man nodded curtly at me, and then at a rack of real swords.

"Pick one up. And I will show you how you do it wrong."

His voice was so strange; I could barely recognize the words, the way they trilled and sang high and low in unexpected ways. "Come! Come! Venturus does not like to keep him waiting. Venturus have many many students are beg him for instruction. He must tell them, 'No, no, I am not for you, I must be for the Mad Duke whose little boy does not even know to pick up the sword!'"

"I'm not a boy," I said.

He shot me a look. "No? You are a rabbit? You have furry paws? Then pick me a sword!"

I grabbed the closest one.

He stood to one side, hands on his hips. "Good." He nodded. "Oh, very good." I began to feel a little less cold. "Very good—*if you are chopping up chicken!*" he thundered. "How you think you are defend yourself when you are need to change lines, eh?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. And I was too afraid to tell him that this was not the way you hold a knife to chop up chickens.

"Lines, change lines—shift the tip by you shift the wrist!"

I tried to, but the sword's weight pulled against me until I turned the hilt in my hand; then I could move my fingers to direct the point better. He wouldn't like that. I stared at the tip, refusing to look at him.

"Yes," Venturus said. "Now you are see. You see—but you do not see!" With a sword in his hand, he suddenly struck my own blade so hard that my hand stung. My sword went flying.

"Ha!" he shouted triumphantly. I didn't see that disarming a beginner was such a triumph. "Don't grip so tight like you mama's tit. Hold gentle, gentle—like you are hold a baby child, or a dog that bite."

I tried not to laugh at the picture. When I held the sword more loosely, it flexed in my hand. "Ye-e-es," he hissed contentedly. "Now you see."

I smiled and, feeling not quite foolish, struck a swordsman's pose.

Venturus screamed as if he had been lashed. "*Wha-a-at* you think you do with you legs? You arms? Do I give you permission to do that thing? I would not. I could not! No student of Venturus ever look like *this*." His imitation of my pose looked like a rag doll strung with wires.

In a small voice I said, "I'm sorry." I hate being made fun of.

"You know you sorry! Stupid duke-boy! Now you practice: practice holding, only holding. You like you kill someone now—maybe you kill Venturus, yes—but first, you hold! Ha!"

The weird foreigner flung a cloak around his shoulders.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I go see other students, students know how to listen to Venturus. You study to hold. Maybe tomorrow, I show how not to stand. Ha!"

And with a swirl of his cloak, he was gone.

I held the sword. Even after the door closed, I was not at all sure Master Venturus would not suddenly reappear through it, his mustaches bristling.

In my hand the sword looked solid and workmanlike, like a rolling pin, or the handle of a hoe. Then I looked down the entire length of it and saw how narrow the steel was, how shiny. It had no purpose but distance and death.

I wondered what my mother would say, and found no answer. For the first time in my life, I wished I could be holding a sewing needle instead; suddenly that instrument of torture seemed small and comfortable and harmless. My arm ached, no matter how I turned the sword. I decided to put it away, and go back to my room and change into the sort of girl who might ask a housekeeper if she needed help with the mending.

In the wardrobe, my new clothes were neatly hung and folded. I looked behind them for my old gowns, and found nothing. Nothing in the chest, nothing hung out to air; nothing remained of all my skirts and bodices and petticoats and stockings, carefully chosen and mended and packed a few days before.

I did not bother trying to find Betty. I knew what had happened. I knew, and I was not having it. This was one contest the Mad Duke would not win.

The card in my pocket read: ARTEMISIA FITZ-LEVI, BLACKBURN HOUSE. I would be seen on the street in these ridiculous clothes once only. Grimly clutching my cloak around me, I set out through the gates of Tremontaine House to find my friend.

IT WAS NOT LONG BEFORE LADY ARTEMISIA FITZ-LEVI BEGAN to tire of the antics of her new pet. The parrot was a bit too clever—she had expected a sort of colorful talking doll, not something with a mind of its own. The parrot preferred fruit to cakes, earlobes to fingers and velvet to the bottom of its cage. It liked women better than men; when her cousin Lucius Perry came to call, it flew at him, and she had to get her maid to take it downstairs, where, no doubt, it would amuse the house staff far more than it did her, though it had not been acquired for that purpose.

"You look decorative," she approved her cousin Lucius. Artemisia thought that the right amount of lace always complimented a man's appearance. Of course, with his slender build, dark hair and blue eyes, Lucius had good material to work with.

"And you look exhausted." Lord Lucius Perry, lounging in her windowseat, gazed longingly at the fragile cinnamon wafers that lay just at the edge of his reach on an equally fragile painted table. "Out dancing your slippers to ribbons again, coz? What gallant has caught your eye this time?"

In strictest confidence she was perishing to tell him about the duke's party last night, but he went on without waiting for an answer, "And where is your reprobate brother? Robert promised me a bout of tennis today; is he out already paying court to his last night's conquests, or still sleeping them off?"

Artemisia smiled patiently at him. He was a cousin, so not worth much more, and a younger son at that. "Do I look awful, Lucius? Have I got rings under my eyes? I bathed them in cucumber water, but I'm not sure it's done any good—and I particularly don't want Mama to know what I've been doing," she hinted broadly.

Lucius did not even pretend to be interested. "Nothing awful, I hope. You don't want to get yourself talked about, Artemisia, not when your prospects are so good this year."

"Of course nothing awful! What do you take me for? You're a fine one to lecture me, Lucius, indeed you are. I understand you were once up to all sorts of mischief Mama won't even tell me about."

"That's just it," he drawled; "I've reformed."

"Well, it's made you uncommon dull."

"Do you think so?" He smiled just a little; his eyelashes fluttered over his cheeks as he extended one languid finger toward the plate—but his cousin

was impervious to that particular sort of innuendo.

"Honestly, Lucius, you are the laziest man I ever met! Lean over and take your own biscuit, don't expect me to get up and pass them to you when you're this close to the table!"

Lucius Perry leaned back, instead, bathing his fine-boned face in a slanting patch of sun. All he could see through his eyelids was a rich, comforting red; if his cousin stopped talking for a minute, he might fall asleep.

No, he wouldn't: a knocking on the front door and a flurry of feet below heralded the approach of another visitor. "Artemisia," he said, not bothering to open his eyes, "you want to be careful. You're pretty, the family's good, your father's generous and you've got a nice voice. I wouldn't be surprised if someone offered for you before the year turns. Just don't compete with Robert in daring: city ballrooms are not exactly the same as climbing trees and jumping out of haylofts back home."

She drew herself up proudly. "Thank you for the advice, cousin. As if I don't know how to behave in town! I like it here, a great deal better than in the country. As far as I'm concerned, I'd be happy to call this home for the rest of my life, and I hope I marry a man who thinks so, too: someone with style and a bit of dash like Robert, not a dullard like you, who thinks an exciting day is playing tennis and calling on relatives, and an exciting evening is staying home and reading a book or whatever it is you do with yourself—anyhow, I didn't see *you* at Tremontaine House last night!"

"Tremontaine House?" Lucius Perry abandoned his lassitude. "You don't want anything to do with those people, cousin."

She tossed her head, and her curls bounced. "And why not, pray? I am not the Country Filly you seem to think me, cousin. I know how to handle myself in Society."

"Do you?" He was leaning forward, his blue eyes dark and full on her.

She squelched the humiliating recollection of her host putting her to flight. "Certainly. There's nothing so terrifying at Tremontaine House"—she laughed brightly—"except perhaps for the Mad Duke himself, of course. He's quite rude, isn't he? I don't know what all those people see in him, really."

"No, you wouldn't. That is why he's dangerous." His smile was now consciously charming. "Of course you understand Society, cousin: you are

one of its brightest ornaments. But the Duke Tremontaine is outside Society. Even he agrees that that is where he belongs. And he encourages others—not, of course, that you could be so encouraged—but those around him, to, ah, to explore those outposts as well."

"Well, they all seemed perfectly normal to me: the usual sort of Ball and Salon types, just both in one place, that's all. It's hardly—"

Her curls splashed her neck as she turned her head toward the commotion downstairs: a clatter in the marble hall of booted feet, a shrill cry.

"Perhaps it's Robert," Lucius drawled, "with a new conquest."

Someone was running upstairs—two someones. The first was the footman, who opened the door to the sitting room just wide enough to announce breathlessly, "A—female, my lady, who will see you, she says, though I did—"

"From the party," a girl's voice insisted shrilly. "Tell her Katherine, Lady Katherine Talbert—only I don't have a card—from Tremontaine House."

Lucius dealt his cousin a jaded look.

The footman threw open the door. "Lady Katherine."

There stood the oddest figure Lady Artemisia had ever seen outside the theatre; worse than the theatre, really, because there the actresses in boys' roles at least made some attempt to trim their hair, hide their figures and adopt a manly bearing. This was so clearly a girl, small and round, her long hair messily escaping from a ribbon in frizzy tendrils. Only her clothes were a perfect copy of a man's, in every detail.

Artemisia Fitz-Levi put a hand over her mouth. She knew it was rude, but she couldn't help it, the laughter just came squeezing out. The girl stared at her. Her face went pale, then red.

"From Tremontaine House," said Lucius smugly. "Well: you see my point."

Katherine Talbert spun on the heel of her ridiculous boots, and ran clattering out the hall and down the stairs.

NO ONE WOULD HAVE LOOKED TWICE AT THE BOY IF he had not been running frantically through a very sedate section of the Hill, where running

generally meant some kind of trouble.

"Hey, there!" A hand shot out, bringing the figure to a skittering stop. Philibert, Lord Davenant, was not an observing sort of man; he saw a boy's face because he expected to see a boy's face, and the estimable Lord Davenant was one who liked the world to be compassed by order and decorum. This boy's long hair, therefore, meant University, and few scholars belonged on the Hill. Furthermore, the boy had been crying and seemed terrified at being apprehended.

"Aha," said Lord Davenant. "What's your hurry? Something in your pockets, maybe?" He thrust a hand into one of them, keeping a grip on the boy's wrist.

"Help!" shrilled the boy. "Let go of me!" He tried to wriggle out of the older man's grasp. "How dare you?"

"Little rat!" Davenant surveyed him, half-amused. "Shall I call the Watch, or just thrash you myself?"

The boy wiped his nose with his free arm. "If you were a gentleman," he said suddenly, "you would escort me back to Tremontaine House."

"Oh." Abruptly Lord Davenant dropped the wrist as if afraid of contagion. "So you're that kind of rat, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Go on, get off with you." Davenant's views on Tremontaine were well known in Council. The last thing he wanted was to be seen accosting one of the Mad Duke's fancy boys on the open street. "There's your direction, go on."

The boy drew himself up and walked away shakily.

I HAD FORGOTTEN THE WAY AND HAD ONLY A DIM RECOLLECTION of what Tremontaine House looked like from the street. All the walls of all the great houses looked the same, and all their black and gold-tipped gates. I tried to walk as if I knew where I was going.

"Hello, Lady Katherine."

Standing before me was a boy about my age. He was plainly dressed, with a plain, ordinary face. It took me a moment to recognize the duke's servant,

the valuable Marcus, the boy who knew where everything was. He said, "I'm heading back to Tremontaine House, if you'd like to come with me."

I followed him in silence. He had never introduced himself, and he didn't do so now, just talked to me as if we had always known each other.

"It's a nice day, isn't it? Betty thought you'd run away, but I guessed you might just have gone for a walk; you wouldn't want to get her in trouble by disappearing or something. You should try exploring the House gardens," he chatted amicably, "they're very interesting. Paths, and statues and fountains and things, though I think they've turned the fountains off for the season. The gardeners dig up the flowers all the time and put new ones in. They grow them in a big glass house. It's quite a production. You can have flowers put in your room, if you like. Want me to order them for you?"

The front hall of Tremontaine House was cool and white and empty. Gone the bustle and striving of last night; in their place was a spooky sweet serenity.

"Where is the duke?" I asked.

"Gone. Everyone's gone to the Riverside house."

"Everyone? But I—"

"Oh, not you. You're staying here."

"Alone?" Panic sharpened my voice.

"Not really. There's a whole staff lives here. He comes and goes, you see. He likes to have things ready for him always, here. They'll take care of you. Just tell Betty what you need."

"Are—are you staying here?" I hated myself for wanting a particular answer, but at least he was a friendly face.

"No. I go where he goes."

"When will you—will he—be back?"

"Whenever he feels like it. The Riverside house is warmer in winter; this one's better in summer. In between, like now…" Marcus shrugged.

"Is it far out in the country?"

"Is what far?"

"Riverside."

The boy laughed, as if I'd told him a joke on purpose. Then he shook his head. "Riverside? It's right here in the city. The other end of the city, the old bit, near the docks. Riverside's an island in the river. It's nothing special, really. I wouldn't live there. But he likes it."

"Is it a nice house?"

"It's an odd house." Again, the shrug. "He likes it."

"Well," I said, and something struck me. "Then, while he is there, I am the mistress of this house?"

"Why would you be?"

I'd never met such a rude servant. But then, this wasn't a normal household. I explained carefully to him, "Well, most houses have a master and a mistress. If the lord is unmarried, it's a sister, or a daughter, most often, who takes over the duty. So it stands to reason—" Marcus continued to look at me patiently, waiting for me to begin making sense. It put me off. "It stands to reason that, as the duke's niece, I would—In his absence I would be—"

"He left no instructions about that," Marcus told me gravely. "I could ask him, if you like, but…"

He didn't have to complete the thought. I had had quite enough of the Mad Duke's notice already. "Well, then," I said airily, looking around the huge front hall, "with no duties, I shall be a lady of leisure."

"If you're all right," he said, "I'd better be getting back."

Marcus did not bow as he left me. Only after he was gone did I realize that he had not seemed to notice the strangeness of my clothing, and that, while I was with him, neither had I.

IN MY BEAUTIFUL ROOM OVER THE RIVER, I SAT IN A delicate armchair working out just how miserable I could be. My visit to Artemisia's had been a disappointment. But then, probably she hadn't recognized me without my gown, and that terrible man with her had started being snide before I could explain. I'd just have to watch and wait for another chance. Artemisia had spoken last night of eternal friendship. Surely, once she knew what my uncle had done to me, my friend would help me to find some decent clothes and make sure I met decent people. I could not escape Tremontaine House entirely. I must do what I had to do to please the duke; after all, my family's fortune depended on it. But surely I wasn't meant to be a prisoner here!

I took a deep breath, and comforted myself opening a pretty box that contained beautifully ironed handkerchiefs. It wasn't going to be so bad,

was it? Alone in one of the loveliest houses in the city, with no Mad Duke popping out from behind doors to torment me. No onerous duties, no housework whatsoever, as far as I could tell. Stupid clothes and pointless lessons, of course. But Master Venturus hadn't said anything about my killing people; he seemed to just want me to look nice with a sword. Like dance lessons; I could do that.

I looked in the charming gilded writing desk to see if it contained notepaper. There was none. I would have to tell Betty to get me some so that I could write to Artemisia, and to my mother. No, wait, that was in the bargain, too: no family letters for six months, and no visits, either. My brother Gregory had lodgings somewhere in the city, but he was not permitted anywhere near me. It was probably just as well. Gregory is very earnest, like our father; although he had been in the city for several months, the Mad Duke had never invited him to visit, and I could see why, now. Gregory believes in rules, so he would probably not try to sneak around and find me, even though my mother probably wished he would. I could write to her, anyway…but the thought of page after page of letters piling up unread over the weeks just made me feel worse.

How was she getting on without me? I worried. She was probably doing everything wrong, even though I'd left her a list—forgetting to air the winter linens, not keeping the tables waxed, letting the kitchen maids fight over the boot boy…And who was going to comb her hair out so it didn't hurt, and match her embroidery silks, and remind her to take her tonic?

The house was doubtless going to wrack and ruin in my absence, and here I was, a useless creature being asked to take up useless skills I wasn't even any good at and never would be! And all for some mad whim of my mad uncle, who couldn't even be bothered to say good-bye to me when he left me alone in a strange house.

My boots made a satisfying thump as I stomped downstairs to look for a library where there might be paper. Or maybe I could find a genealogy that would tell me all of my stupid uncle's mysterious names, so I could impress him if ever I saw him again. At last I found it, a grand room laced floor to ceiling with more books than I'd ever seen in my life. They looked very dull: *On the Causes of Nature, The Tyrant's Dialogue*, that sort of thing. Most of the bindings were chased and stamped with gold, making the outsides far more appealing than the insides. Lost in the wealth of volumes, at last I

found a lavish book called *Geographical Exotica* and settled into a window seat to examine pictures and descriptions of distant places I only half-believed existed. In the margin of a page about the island of Kyros, someone had written, *Where the honey comes from!* The book said it was an island of thyme, in which the bees sang all day.

chapter V

In a warm and richly furnished room in Riverside, the smell of candles and food and bodies and wine wove a net of security and comfort around a group of men who usually settled for less. They were as happy as they were ever likely to be, with bellies nearly full, and no brakes upon the conversation.

"Pass Soliman the meat," the Duke Tremontaine commanded. "He can't discuss our animal nature until he becomes one with it!"

With his plate well stacked, the philosopher started up again. "All I was saying, with Dorimund's permission, is that training is the antithesis of nature. It must be. If shunning what is called vice were natural, as shunning cold or the pain of a fire is, then we would not need to be counseled against it!"

Taking a drink, an older, bearded man said, "I see you have no children, Sol. You must pull their hands back from the fire a hundred times, or risk losing them to it."

"Experience," another asserted. "Experience is the teacher there. 'The burnt hand shuns the fire' and all that. There is a difference between experience and training."

"Abstract thinking is what we're talking about. The fruits of vice are not immediately apparent, as the pain of fire is."

The duke leaned forward across the table. Like the scholars he was dressed in black, only his was studded with jet and dark embroidery. "The 'fruits of vice,'" he said, "are open to debate. They are not empirical, like a burnt finger. They may be abstract, Dorimund, but—" He stopped when the boy Marcus appeared at his side. "Yes, what?"

"A woman," Marcus murmured, "has come to the West door."

"Bugger the woman," the duke snarled. "Make her wait."

His servant showed him a ring. "She said you gave her this."

The duke's eyes widened slightly. "And so I did. I didn't think she'd show. I had better—" He pulled himself up from the table, bowing to his guests. "Gentlemen. I'll catch the rest of this later, or when Soliman publishes his controversial theories to the disgust of all right-thinking people, an effort I will be delighted to finance. Sol, stop eating, you look all round and rosy and harmless; people will feel silly hissing someone on the street who looks like a cradle doll."

To the laughter of his guests he left the table, ducking between hanging cloths, following Marcus through an arched door and down two small flights of steps, each one a different width, one turning to the left and another to the right.

THE CLOAKED WOMAN STARTED WHEN HE ENTERED. She had not expected a door behind the paneling. The duke shrugged. "It's quicker. I didn't want you to wait. I was afraid you'd lose your nerve."

Her voice was only a little breathy. "It's quite steeled, thank you."

Abruptly he caught her hand in his. "But you're cold."

"Chilly. I often am before a performance."

"I'm not a demanding audience."

"I've heard otherwise."

His smile was slow and personal, oddly charming. “And you the celebrated Black Rose. Well, I am honored.”

“The honor is mine, my Lord of Tremontaine.” She took a strand of his long hair between her fingers, put it to her lips.

The duke closed his eyes for a moment. Then he twined thumb and forefinger about her wrist. “Not just yet,” he said. “There is the matter of your intriguing friend, first.”

She stood quite still. “He’s not all that intriguing.”

“I find him so.”

“You don’t have to sleep with him.”

“Neither do you, really, but you choose to do so.” She drew breath to speak, but he put his fingers lightly on her lips. “Lord Davenant is becoming an important man, closely allied to the new Crescent Chancellor. Prestige, money, adventure…It’s your game; I won’t tell you how to play it. I’m just delighted you’re going to play it with me, too.”

She raised her own hand to his to caress the backs of his fingers on her lips. Abruptly he turned away, businesslike. “I asked you for evidence of his latest clever scheme. Now, let’s see it. Even flat on my back—or yours—I can tell a real document from a fake one.”

The actress reached into the folds of her cloak. He stepped back a pace, because it might always be a dagger. But she produced a real document, hung with seals and ribbons, very official.

“Nice,” the duke said, examining it. “Very nice. This will more than do. Marcus—” Without looking behind him, he handed it to his servant. “Arthur knows what to do with this. Tell him to make two copies and return the original”—he looked the woman in the eyes—“how soon, do you think?”

“Soon. I’ll be missed if I’m not back tonight.”

“Can’t you tell him your rehearsal ran late?”

“I already have.”

The actress was trembling. The duke drew her into the crook of his arm, and slipped his ring back onto her finger. “Keep it.”

“I’ll probably sell it.”

“That’s all right.” The man in black pulled her against his chest. “I don’t give things away with an eye on their future.”

The Black Rose turned in his arms, a tall woman who still came only to his chin. Her mouth sought his skin above the embroidered collar. "You're very generous."

"Am I? You don't have to sleep with me, either, but if it—"

"Prestige," she murmured into his throat, "money, adventure."

"—if it makes it any easier, I can give you—"

She kissed him, and he was silent.

They left through the door he had come in. Like a young man squiring a debutante through crowded seats at a ball, the Mad Duke escorted her through the mad halls of his house, from the secret room to a bedroom hung with red curtains, already warmed by a fire.

BUT THAT WAS NOT WHERE MARCUS FOUND HIM TWO hours later—more than two hours, for it took him a while to locate his master, after the woman had been shown the door. The Duke Tremontaine was alone in a room empty of furniture. He was hunched over a dying paper fire in an elaborately carved fireplace. His unbound hair swept the ashes. The room was cold and dark, but for the red glow of the last of the embers.

Marcus knew which floorboard creaked.

"I need more wood," the duke said without turning around. "I'm cold."

"There's a fire in your bedroom."

A shudder passed through Tremontaine. "No. I won't go back there."

"Shall I get blankets for you?"

"Yes. No—I can't sleep in this room. Not here."

"If you'd let me move a bed in, or even a couch…"

Tremontaine wore nothing but a velvet robe. It twisted around his long limbs when he turned to look up at his servant. "No, Marcus. There will not be any bed in here ever again."

"All right. What if I make a fire in the library? You could have some blankets in there, and read for the rest of the night."

"Where are my guests, my scholars?"

"They've all gone to bed, or gone home. Shall I wake one up for you?"

The duke shook his head, and noticed his hair. He tucked most of it into his collar. "No, you go to bed. I'll…I'll be along."

"I think you'll like the library," coaxed Marcus doggedly. "There are cushions, and rugs, and nice heavy curtains. And plenty of books."

"I know what's in the library," the duke snarled, sounding a bit more like himself.

Marcus held out his hands, and the tall man took them; together, they pulled him to his feet.

chapter VI

IT WAS ALL RIGHT DURING THE DAY. BUT AT NIGHT, stripped down to my boy's shirt, tucked in the great bed in the empty house in a city of strangers, I wanted my mother! We always shared our woes and tried to help each other. I wished she knew how brave I was being, but there was no way to tell her about any of it, and what could she do, anyway? I cried very quietly, not liking to hear myself.

In the morning, I let the chocolate console me, and let Betty do up all my clothes with her able fingers. She didn't smell of drink—yet. I left half the chocolate for her.

My new clothes were not so hard to move in today. They seemed looser, more welcoming, less restrictive.

Master Venturus was waiting for me in the wet rabbit room. He was practicing against a wall, and didn't seem to see me when I came in.

"Good morning!" I said, to show I wasn't afraid this time.

"Yes," he said, still crouching and springing with sword in hand. "Why aren't you practice?"

"I will if you like."

"You get up, you practice. You eat, you practice. You go to bed, you practice—first." He turned at last to face me. "Otherwise, no good. No point." He looked me over. "No blanket today? Not so cold? Very good. Now you show Venturus you hold."

I held. Then I stood—wrong, of course, at first, and then right, so perfectly, I was told, that I must not move, and did not, and thought I was going to die of the ache in my arm holding the sword and my legs holding the stance, a gradual ache that became pain that sharpened to agony.

"Strike!" Venturus shouted suddenly.

I sprang forward, heedless of form, just to release the pain—and nearly fell over. My sword clanged from my hand to the floor.

"Not so good." My master's exaggerated sympathy failed to cover his smugness. "Not so good, ha? You practice, practice, practice, then no pain, no hurt, you strike—strike like snake. Ha! Now pick up sword." He hissed. "Tsss! No thumb on blade! Stupid. Rust, dust, all kinds of blick. You polish, make good."

It was worse than polishing silver. The blade's shiny metal darkened the moment my finger touched it. And those edges could be sharp, too, though the tip was blunted. Venturus gave me lime powder and oil and a soft leather cloth. For once, I was glad of my breeches; it would have been hard to do in skirts.

Venturus waited 'til I was done. Then he said, "I go. What you do now?"

I looked out to the garden. It was raining. "I practice," I said.

"Good." To my surprise, he added, "Not too long, first day. Then make bath, good soak with—tss!—how you call, good salts—then wine. After." On his way out the door, he paused and whirled back to me: "No-wine-no-sword!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You no drink with sword! Drink is ruin sword."

With a swirl of his cloak, he was gone.

THE MORE TIME I SPENT IN TREMONTAINE HOUSE, the more beautiful I found it. I couldn't understand why my uncle the Mad Duke didn't like it here. Maybe it was just too good for him and he knew it. Everything about the house was perfect: the colors carefully chosen, the furniture balanced in form and size to every room; even the views out the tall windows were as lovely as pictures. I would find myself just looking at the way the lines of a room's molding met the ceiling. Sometimes they joined in carven leaves, edged with just a little gold; sometimes faces peered amongst them; sometimes there were patterned jags, hard edges that almost made blocks of letters, like words you couldn't quite read.

Each room was filled with treasures. I made myself choose a favorite in each one: the game was that I could save only one thing from each room, and what would it be? In one it was a tiny ivory carving of balls within balls, each one moving separately but never touching. In another I was hard put to choose between a painted fan mounted on a stand and a little china calf with the most winning expression! I was surprised at how many of the things I found were ladies' things. I remembered the duke my uncle saying with some distaste, "It's very elegant. I inherited it from my grandmother." His grandmother had been Duchess Tremontaine before him; that much I knew. Perhaps it was her very own armchair that I loved to sit in, in my room above the river, my feet tucked up under me as I watched the colors change over the hills.

I liked to visit the dining room with the long windows and mirrors, even though I never ate in there. At the center of the enormous table, there was a serving epergne as large as a baby's cradle, made out of silver. Branches twisted around it, ending in oak leaves on which sweets might be placed; the middle was a large dish supported by silver deer that grazed or glanced up around it, amongst life-sized silver walnuts that were half as big as the deer were. Sometimes I patted or stroked the deer, although I knew it would make the silver tarnish faster. But it was folly to leave silver out like that in the air, anyway. A girl came in once a week to polish it; I came upon her one day and offered to help, but she would not let me. If the servants found me odd, they didn't say so. They were very polite and always called me Lady Katherine. Of course, they must be accustomed to behavior far odder than mine. And you couldn't know where they themselves had come from—though, as my mother had taught me, it would be the height of

rudeness to ask. It's different in the country, where we know everybody for miles around. It seemed like a waste to keep on polishing the thing, but I was not invited to give advice on housekeeping. I began to realize just how much money my uncle the duke had at his disposal, and was fascinated by what he chose and did not choose to spend it on. I wondered whether the Riverside house were as richly furnished, or even more so.

And I wondered what was in my uncle's private rooms, here in Tremontaine House. I knew which ones they were: at the other end of the house from mine, a large suite that overlooked both the river and the courtyard. He could watch the sunset, and he could see visitors arriving. Once I stood outside the door, wondering if it was locked, and what I would do if it wasn't. He'd never know if I looked in, would he? But what would I see if I did? Next time he makes me really angry, I promised myself, I'll sneak in and look at everything, no matter what. Behind me, the portrait of a sad young woman gazed mournfully at me, as if to warn me of the perils of intrusion.

Portraits spattered the walls of Tremontaine House: large and small, square and round, dark and bright. In our house in the country there were portraits, too, but they were all my father's forebears. This was my mother's family. I tried to figure out which of the painted people looked familiar, and who was related to whom. When I couldn't guess, I'd make it up. The young man with the sour face and riding crop in the upstairs narrow hall was pining for the stiff young woman holding a rose in the little salon. But she was betrothed from birth to a red-faced bedroom man with a goblet. I could tell they would never be happy. I considered having the young man break his neck in a riding accident just to make sure everyone was good and miserable. I even wrote a poem for the young lady beginning *Ah, never shall I see thy shining face once more,* but all I could think of for next was *When I stand looking out the garden door,* and even though it did rhyme I knew it wasn't really poetry.

But the pictures also discomfited me: after looking at them long enough I would begin to wonder who these people truly were, and what order they had come in. Was the old man the son of the pretty young girl, or her father, or her husband? Or had he died before she was born? My painted forebears could not speak to answer, and no one in Tremontaine House could tell me who they were.

In the mirrored salon was one portrait that always pleased me. The painting was vivid and bright, not so old-fashioned as the rest: a woman in a pretty dress, with curls so fair as to be almost silver. It was a wonderful, lively painting. She was looking just past my shoulder as if someone was coming in the door behind me and she was sharing a joke with them, laughing as if she wanted a secret teased out of her. Her eyes glistened, and the pale grey satin of her dress did, too; even her jewels looked real, until you got close enough to see that it was only bits of paint: streaks of white over rose swirling to red, and such. Behind her, I was almost sure I recognized the lawn of Tremontaine House itself, sweeping down to the river. People were playing flamingo on the grass. I decided we had nearly the same nose. I wondered if, when I had the right gown, I might get the same artist to paint my portrait, too, and if I might look even half as lovely as the lady in grey.

ARTEMISIA FITZ-LEVI'S MOTHER DID NOT THINK MUCH of her choice of gowns for the evening's festivities, and was busy telling her so. "A supper-party, my dear, is not a ball," she said. "Even if there is dancing after, you want something a little more…restrained."

"But M*ama*," Artemisia argued, "the green silk was most particularly admired by the Duke of Hartsholt at the Hetleys'! And you said his taste is impeccable."

"So it is, my dear—and don't think he won't notice if you wear it again! Do you want to look as if you are courting his favor? And Hartsholt a married man…no, no, it would never do."

Artemisia pouted. "Don't be ridiculous, Mama. No one would think that. Besides, I wanted to wear the tourmalines Papa gave me, and they suit it perfectly."

"So they do, my love, and you shall wear them at the next possible occasion. But not the green, not so soon after you've worn it once. Do you want people to think you don't have enough gowns?"

That worked, where nothing else had. "What about the yellow?" Artemisia asked hopefully. The yellow dress was the result of an argument

her mother had lost, with a bodice cut down to there, and enough flounces to trim a cake.

"Don't you think it might hurt Lydia's feelings, since it is her party and she looks so peaky in yellow?"

"Mama, you are an angel of kindness!" Artemisia flung her arms around her mother's neck. "How could I be so unfeeling? I know—I shall write to my dear Lydia." Artemisia settled in a ruffle of dressing gown at her escritoire. "I'll see what she's wearing. If it's white or cream or ecru, I'll wear mine, too."

"Now why," her mother said dryly, "did we not think of that before?"

And Lady Fitz-Levi went to scribble off a note to Lydia's mother, so that Dorrie could take them both at once, and return with the correct response.

MASTER VENTURUS CONTINUED COMING EVERY DAY. Every day Betty laid out my sturdy practice clothes, and every day I dutifully put them on and went to the practice room to meet him. And every day after he'd left I'd practice for an hour or more. What else was there for me to do with my time? I could hold the sword without my arms aching for quite a while now, and my legs could hold their position without trembling, at least until Venturus was gone. I learned how to hold, how to stand, even how to strike —if aiming at a spot in the air can be accounted striking. It was all a bit dull, really, this training to be a swordsman. Venturus talked, and I repeated drills for him, and he talked some more, and finally he left and I did them again and again, until it was time for my bath.

I didn't even notice the morning I woke up with no ache in my muscles at all. Betty did, though; *sprightly*, she called me, and I went down to my lesson feeling very pleased with myself for being sprightly instead of sluggish and dull. Venturus retaliated with a whole new set of moves for me to learn: parries and ripostes, with no particular purpose that I could see except to make me turn my wrist in funny ways and feel like even more of a useless idiot. He would never even show me how to do them properly, just talked talked talked until I got it right, it seemed, only to stop his voice. I began to wonder if he was ever going to teach me to fight for real.

So it was a great startlement to me, the day he stood waiting for me stripped to his breeches and shirt, holding a powerful sword with an intricately woven basket. It was not a practice sword. It had an edge, a real one.

I drew in a deep breath. Guard, feint, parry, riposte…I could do this. I would have to, to keep that evil blade from me. Venturus had thrown his jacket over the rack of practice swords. He smelt sweaty, as if he'd been drilling already. But when I went to pick up a weapon, he stopped me. "No. You no sword. You stand."

His sharp steel tip directed me to the center of the room. I stood there at the guard, miming a sword in my hand.

"No guard!" my strange teacher corrected. "You standing stand."

I stood still, my arms at my sides. He raised the sword in one swift motion. I flinched.

"Stand."

I said carefully, "I think that you are going to hurt me. I can't just stand here without—"

"Good. Good you think. No laughing sword. Laughing sword is death sword." He smiled, showing large yellow teeth. "But Venturus not to hurt. No hurt if stand, no move. No-o-o move." I didn't move. Slowly, but perfectly steadily, the sword was swinging in a great arc towards me. I watched it come. I thought as hard as I could about how much practice it must have taken for Venturus to be able to keep it at that steady rate, without wavering.

The blade stopped at the cloth of my shirtsleeve.

"No-o-o move."

I did not move. He swung it suddenly to my knee, and I would have jumped except that I was afraid he'd hit me by accident then.

Venturus stepped back a pace. "Good."

So quickly I had no time to be frightened, he had the tip at my neck. Without appearing to change his stance, Venturus extended his arm a crucial fraction simply by tightening his muscles, and the metal pressed into my skin. I knew it did not break through, although I felt it all the way down to the small of my back. I did not swallow until he'd taken it away.

"Yess," he said in his satisfied hiss. He was not even winded. "Now you see."

"See what?" I demanded hotly. When I lose my temper, I'm afraid it's gone. "See you are the biggest show-off in the world, or see you nearly scared me out of a year's growth?"

He lowered his blade and twirled it at his side in a very show-offy way. "Hmm," he observed to the air around him, "little scared duke-boy gets anger."

"Yes, I get angry when I'm scared—what do you want me to do, cry?"

"Anger," Venturus said, "is enemy to sword. Many angry men killed by sword."

"Is that so?"

Venturus made a tour of the room, working the sword in flashy patterns so that I had to keep well away. "Fear," he observed to the air, "is enemy to sword. And fear to sword is friend. You see now?"

"No."

"No? Why not? You have eyes, but you no see. I teach and teach, but you no learn. Why you no learn, silly duke-boy?"

I took a deep breath. "I see one thing," I said, "and that's that I'll never be any good at this. And you know what? That's just fine with me, because it was never my idea in the first place, remember? So why don't you just go ahead and tell my uncle that I have too bad a temper and I'm too scared and stupid ever to be a decent swordsman, and then we can all go home!"

He turned to me with real hardness in his eyes. The sword was down at his side, but for the first time, the man truly frightened me. "Do not sharpen your tongue on Venturus," he growled. "Do not command like to some servant." His nostrils flared as he breathed deeply. "I go now, yes? This no day for sword."

I stood very still as he put on his shirt and jacket, picked up his sword-belt and weapon and left. "*Do you ever even take a bath?*" I shouted to the door once it had closed behind him.

chapter VII

As the cloudless sky above the river faded from blue to grey to green before settling into another deeper, darker blue that set off the evening star to perfection, the curtains of Godwin House were drawn against the night chill and the vapors of the river.

Scented candles were lit in the music room, which turned warm, hazy and dreamlike amongst their fumes, the vases of flowers and the perfumed men and women in their whispering satin.

The young Lady Lydia Godwin had assembled a group of friends for a dinner—or, rather, her mother had assembled them for her from a slightly longer list of Lydia's. Since her first ball, Lydia was now allowed a certain number of small gatherings, carefully monitored and chaperoned.

After a dinner of eleven dishes and much innuendo, all Lydia wanted to do was to disappear into a corner with her closest friends to discuss the preceding events: looks and comments, dresses and ornaments, jokes and compliments. Instead, she must play the hostess and restrict herself to the occasional glance across the room at Artemisia Fitz-Levi when anything particularly struck her.

It wasn't so easy to catch Lady Artemisia's eye. Her attention was occupied by a nobleman in mulberry silk who seemed always to be speaking earnestly to her.

Artemisia could not be certain of whether Lord Terence Monteith was a bore or not. He had good clothes and good jewels, and a very pleasant face. The Godwins had invited him and he was unmarried, so clearly he had prospects. But nothing he was saying interested her. Which was odd, because he was not, as is usual with men, demanding that she listen to him. He was asking her opinion of things, and hanging on her every word. It was just that she had no opinion on the things he asked her. She hadn't spent a

lot of time thinking about whether musicians who played on the street should be required to have licenses, or livestock entering the city be inspected for disease. It was, of course, flattering that he wanted to know. "Really?" he kept saying. "Do you think so? And what about…?" until she was taxed for invention. In fact, it was beginning to feel a bit too much like a lesson she hadn't prepared for, which made her cross. She was not, after all, in the schoolroom any longer. Artemisia tossed her curls. "Lord Terence," she said, "how charming to find a man who thinks a woman knows more than just fashion and poetry!" hoping that at least he'd want to ask her about those.

His eyes never left her face. "What perfect teeth you have," Lord Terence said, confirming her suspicion that he was, in fact, a bore and, having no conversation of his own, had simply been asking her to provide it while he stared at her.

Lydia's parents came in then with a handful of their own friends who had been dining elsewhere. Artemisia had to restrain herself from dropping a schoolgirl's curtsey to Michael, Lord Godwin, and his lady, now that she was a young lady herself.

The eddy of newcomers should have been enough to detach her from Lord Terence, but the young nobleman was nothing if not persistent. In a moment he would ask if he might call on her, and she would have to say yes, or she would hear about it from her mother. She looked desperately for Lydia to signal for aid, but the daughter of the house was being dutiful with one of her parents' guests: a tall, dark-haired man with a distinguished air.

"Old people," Artemisia murmured daringly to Terence, no longer caring what he thought of her, "why must they insinuate themselves and spoil the party?"

Sure enough, her suitor drew back a little shocked. "That is Lord Ferris," he said, "the new Crescent Chancellor himself! Really, I wonder that Lady Godwin will have him here, now that he has taken her husband's place as head of the Council of Lords; but I suppose they are used to these ups and downs in politics. I have already taken my seat in Council, of course, but I've spoken only once or twice, on minor matters…"

"About cattle?" she asked piquantly, "or fish?"

Lord Terence missed the mockery completely, and was about to tell her which, when suddenly Artemisia made the mistake of catching Lydia's eye,

and burst into helpless laughter.

Lord Ferris turned his whole head to look at her. His left eye was covered with a black velvet patch. "Hmm," he said to Lydia. "Possibly the first person ever to find Terence Monteith at all amusing. Pray introduce me to your friend."

"Do you mean *Artemisia*?" Lydia could have bitten her own tongue for sounding like a schoolgirl. But the Crescent Chancellor smiled at her in such a way as to indicate a complete understanding of what a complicated task it was for a young woman to play hostess at her own dinner party; indeed, he made her feel, just for a moment, as though running a party of eligible young people and running the Council of Lords were not such entirely different tasks.

"With pleasure," Lydia said smoothly. Lord Ferris must be older than her father, but unlike her father, he took the trouble to treat a young girl like a proper lady, not someone who still ate in the nursery with her little brothers. His hair was very black, with just a little silver, and his hands were finely shaped, ornamented with heavy, tasteful gold rings. The eyepatch only gave him an air of mystery. She felt tremendously grown-up when he offered her his arm and guided her across the floor to where Artemisia Fitz-Levi stood, with Terence Monteith gawking beside her.

Lord Ferris was, after all, a widower; and if Terence had had the sort of mind that observed the world around him, he would have known to exactly what purpose Lady Godwin had invited the Crescent Chancellor to stop in at her daughter's party.

HAVING SAID I WOULD NOT CRY, I WAS HONOR BOUND not to. After Venturus left, though, I was ready to cry or spit.

I stalked down to the library. It was a soothing room, quiet and well proportioned, with cozy chairs and an excellent view. But to my annoyance, the duke's librarian was there. He was a dreamy man who hardly seemed to exist, and usually he did not notice that I did. He catalogued and rearranged, making faces at things no one else knew the meanings of, like flakes on the outside of books and notes on the inside of them. He saw me come in, this time, and said, "Good day, Lady Katherine. Can I help you

with your studies? Or are you looking for some more, ah, feminine diversion?" To this day, I don't think he noticed I never wore a dress.

"Yes," I said poisonously; "what have you got that's really feminine in here?"

The librarian's face took on a worried look, as though if he couldn't find the right thing, he'd have to kill himself forthwith. "Ah, nature," he said nervously, "I believe is suitable for young ladies. The late duchess had many rare volumes of plants and animals—and though the classification of birds as animals is still in dispute by Doctors Milton and Melrose, I have put the bird books over here."

I settled myself in a cushioned window seat with a big illustrated volume. The pictures were bigger than live birds are, and you could see all the details. But it was hard to concentrate after my fight with Venturus, with the librarian there muttering to himself. I looked up and saw him pry a little worn leather volume out from between two grand tomes on a shelf. He flipped it open, then dropped the little book on a table as though it had a contagious disease, making disapproving noises all the while. When he left to wash his hands, I pounced on it.

"*The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*, by a Lady of Quality." Opposite the title page was a woodcut of a man in old-fashioned clothes bowing to a lady, one hand on the sword at his side.

I opened to the first page. Many hours later, when the sun went down and I couldn't see the words, I had only gotten to the part where Lady Stella discovers she is with child, and runs away to her cousin in the country so that Fabian does not know it is his, which would ruin his concentration as he prepares for his duel against his great enemy in the University clock tower—although I was fairly certain even then that he would win it, but Mangrove would get away somehow, which he did.

I wrapped the book in my handkerchief and took it to my room. It wasn't stealing, because the duke's book was still in the duke's house, and it had looked to me like the librarian was just going to throw it out anyway.

I wasn't sure how Fabian got to be such a great swordsman when he never seemed to practice, but I admired the way he could fight up and down stairs, and how he lived by the swordsman's code but still was so clever about not killing Lady Stella although he was bound to. He took money for his work, but no one could make him do a thing that he

despised, or harm the innocent. His word and his sword were his honor, everyone knew it, and they all respected him, even Mangrove, who hated him.

I tucked the book under my pillow, determined not to open it again 'til morning. But after supper I put a fresh candle in the holder, and settled down to find out who won the fight in the clock tower, and what became of Stella's baby. I cried so hard I had to get up and hunt for a fresh handkerchief. Even when I'd snuffed the candle I lay with my eyes open, thinking of swordsmen in dark cloaks, their perfect form, their steady hands and clear, unwavering eyes.

The next day I finished the book and immediately started it over again.

When the librarian appeared I asked him if there were any more books about swordsmen. He gave me *Lives of the Heroic Swordsmen*, which didn't mention Fabian or Mangrove, but did have some interesting people in it, like Black Mark of Ariston, who had fought one-armed after his great battle; and Harling Ober, who never refused a challenge, and had carried the sword at the wedding of my great-grandmother, Diane, Duchess Tremontaine. Ober had learned his art by sneaking up to a dangerous rooftop and peeking down at the great swordsman Rampiere, who had refused to teach him. I supposed that I was lucky to have Master Venturus. But my teacher failed to show for my next lesson. Perhaps he had quit, insulted. Perhaps he was staying away just to try and teach me respect. And perhaps he was preparing more mockery about a little scared duke-boy who could not learn the sword. I was all dressed for practice, so I practiced by myself. I wondered how I would fare if I were set upon by king's guards (if we still had a king), or had to fight with one foot on water, the other on the shore. I thought that I would like a cloak as black as night, and a jeweled pin to bind up my hair.

chapter VIII

HAVING SOWN DISSENT AT A MEETING OF THE Council of Lords that morning, and being in the process of acquiring a new coat that afternoon, the Duke Tremontaine was in excellent spirits. He stood in a sun-washed room in his Riverside house, permitting one of his secretaries to read him the latest set of letters received and logged, while he simultaneously dictated responses, tried to hold still for the tailor and entertained a friend.

The duke's chief secretary, a balding young man named Arthur Ghent, removed the tapes from another roll of papers and shook them out. "These are the ones addressed to 'the Duke of Riverside,'" he explained. "I've passed the requests for money on to Teddy; he'll work from your list and include it in the month's report for you to approve. What's left are from people I've never heard of that maybe you have: the usual litany of complaints and suggestions." He shook out a ragtag batch of correspondence written on anything that could hold a sentence, from the backs of old bills to leaves torn from books. "Hmm…" He observed the writing on note after note. "Same hand, same hand, same hand…popular scribe. I wonder who it is?"

"Here, let me see." The duke stretched out his hand for the papers, opening up the seam the tailor had just carefully pinned. "Yes…I know him. Another University man—like you, Arthur, but not so fortunate as to have secured an important secretarial post. First he tried verse, then plays, then drink, which brought him to scribing letters for the less fortunate in Riverside. Let's see…what is on the mind of the less fortunate these days?" The duke scanned a few lines of one, then another. "They don't like the tearing down of ruins—too bad. They like the new gutters—I should think so. Sam Bonner fell in one of them and twisted his foot and wants

reparation. Bonner…is he still alive? He was already pickled when I was a boy." He held the letter out to his secretary. "No reparation, bad precedent. No, wait—where's he writing from?" The duke scanned the bottom of the sheet. "'At Old Madge's off Parmeter Street.' God, he's living in a cellar. Send him something; send him some wine. But no money." Ghent made a note on the back of Bonner's letter.

"It's a joke, you know." The Ugly Girl was sitting in the corner, watching the sun move across the patterned carpet. "This 'Duke of Riverside' business. It isn't your real title. You derive no income from Riverside; it's just your toy."

"That's what you think." The duke eased his long arms out of the coat for the tailor.

"You're wasting your time on all this. The world will always be full of drunks and liars and people down on their luck who never had any to begin with."

"Stick to your field, and let me amuse myself with my particular corner of it. Not so tight," he told the tailor, who nodded, his mouth full of pins. "I must have my hobbies. I don't ride, I don't dance, I don't race, and I don't collect objects of virtue."

She snorted at that. "I still say it's a waste of time. You'd do better to apply yourself to your mathematics."

Because he was in a good mood, he did not attack her. "But I am so useful. I am useful all the time. Today I managed to scuttle an appalling suggestion from an appalling nobleman who thinks he knows something about how this state should be run, and has managed to convince far too many people that he is right. It's just the beginning, of course: Davenant won't stop there; oh, no. He and his very good friend the Crescent Chancellor have a bright new tax plan in mind. One doesn't go after the Crescent like that, so I have started a rumor campaign against Davenant on the street, and called his allies into question with a plethora of minutiae in Council. It will take them days to get over it, by which time I have every reason to believe his mistress will be abandoning him for one of his supporters, which will make him do something stupid." The duke preened. "It is so nice to have work to do that is both useful and amusing."

The Ugly Girl grinned. "All right. I take it back. You are an ornament to society."

"I will be when this jacket gets done. You," he told the tailor, as he eased the duke back into it, "are nothing short of brilliant. I shall be the only man in the city able both to move his arms above his head and look well composed. I'll have another in blue—a different blue, I mean. Lighter. Silk. For when it's hot."

The tailor said, "I will have cloth samples sent for my lord to choose from." He nodded at his assistant, who stood against the wall trying to be invisible, to make invisible note of the duke's request.

"Ahem," said Arthur Ghent. "You said you'd decide today about the Talbert money. For your sister."

"Did I? I thought we'd set the whole thing in motion the day my niece arrived."

"You said not to. You said to wait."

"Did I?" the duke said again. "Well, I suppose I was worried that she'd bolt. She hasn't bolted, has she?"

"No, my lord," said Ghent's assistant. "Still at Tremontaine House, studying with Venturus."

"Well, then. Send the family the big sum, everything they asked for, as a loan against releasing their entire disputed property at the end of the six months."

"How complicated," Flavia said.

"It wasn't my idea; it's what I have lawyers for."

Arthur Ghent finished his notes and picked up another sheaf of papers, on better paper, some of it scented. "These are this week's invitations. Marlowe wants you to listen to his new soprano—"

"No. It's his mistress. She howls."

"Lord Fitz-Levi wants you for cards Wednesday—"

"On the Hill? No."

"Right. But you've turned him down twice now."

"Invite him to the next thing he can be invited to. Not the wife, though, just him."

"Right." He made a note. "Private theatricals at the, ah," he took a deep breath and said it: "the Gentlemen's League of Self-Pleasure."

The duke crowed. "Never! Tell them I am decadent, not desperate." The secretary's hand wavered above the inkwell. "Never mind," his master said mercifully. "Don't answer."

"Thank you, sir. Now, this is a grateful letter from the Orphans' Asylum, thanking you for the beds and the new roof and inviting you to their Harvest Pageant, where the children will sing, dance and recite."

"Regrets." The duke grimaced. "Just regrets. Ignore the other nonsense."

The Ugly Girl swung her foot under her. "You founded the place. Why don't you want to go?"

"I don't like children," the duke replied.

"Then why put out all that money to preserve them?"

"Because it is wrong to let them die." The duke shook the foam of lace at his cuffs, each flower and petal and leaf twisted thread upon thread by the fingers of an artist. "I did nothing to deserve this. I got it all because I had a grandmother with lots of money who left it to me. Before that I lived in two rooms in Riverside. I saw what happened to the products of a moment's pleasure. Other people do not deserve to starve or to be fucked before they know what the word means, just because they have no one."

The beautiful Alcuin had wandered in to hear his final words. He placed a proprietary hand on Tremontaine's silk-covered shoulder. "No one? Then you must get them someone."

"Sometimes," the duke drawled without looking up, "I am almost sure I do not deserve *you*."

Alcuin fiddled with the fall of lace on Tremontaine's collar. "I wish you would not speak that way."

The duke's secretary glanced over at the Ugly Girl. She caught his look and smirked back.

"The nobility of this city have no right to live the way they do," the Duke Tremontaine returned to his observations. "When they undid the monarchy, they revoked the traditional magical rights, not just of kings, but of themselves. They thus have no real right to rule, nor to hold land and profit by others' labors on it. It's odd that nobody's realized that. Though I suppose if anyone tried to say so, he'd be challenged or locked away somewhere, depending on his rank and his lucidity. The Court of Honor, you see, exists not just to legalize noble assassinations but to ensure that only a court of nobles ever has the right to judge a noble's deeds. A neat system, although I believe the privilege of the sword, as they call it, is beginning to show signs of fraying and wear."

"Is that so?" Flavia asked, drawing him out, amused—he did love to lecture—and he obliged:

"Most challenges are fought as pure entertainment. Your swordsman gets a scratch, or *his* does, and you're done for the day. The two nobles who called challenge on each other know what the fight was about, and usually their friends do as well, and everyone respects the outcome. Nobody asks swordsmen to die anymore just to prove a point of honor. Accidents or infection happen, of course, but as long as your man doesn't expire on the spot, nobody's bothered.

"But the darker side still exists, the practical origin of those little skirmishes. A noble can still hire a swordsman to challenge a nobleman without giving him time to find a professional proxy for himself. Even with all the protocols of formal challenge, at the end of the fight, unless he's amazingly lucky, you've got one dead nobleman. Does privilege of the sword extend to the swordsman who did it? Certainly, as long as he can prove he was in a noble's employ. The privilege belongs to them, after all. But to determine this, the matter is brought before the Court of Honor. That's where the real fun begins. The rules of the Court of Honor are arcane, the judgments colorful and highly personal…it's a perfect charade. I've been through it"—he shuddered—"I know. There's more honesty in Riverside, where all the privilege is about who's stronger and madder and meaner."

"What about your noble *women*? What's their privilege?"

He held up his arm to test the stretch of the sleeve again. The tailor nodded. "A woman's honor is still the property of her male relatives, according to the Court."

"Naturally."

"Noblewomen have been known to hire swordsmen when they felt a point needed to be made. But it's considered unladylike these days, as I understand it."

"And your niece?"

"What about her?"

"Will she, as a noblewoman, be fighting her own battles on her own behalf, or will she have to hire a man to do it?"

The duke smiled. "Well, that is the question, isn't it? She seems like a peaceable enough child. We'll just have to wait and see."

Cautiously, the tailor eased the duke out of his new jacket, and handed it to the assistant to fold. The duke watched with interest. "I think you fold things better than my valet," he said. "How would you like a new job?" The assistant turned bright red with the inability to answer. "You should seize your moments," the duke told him; "they may not come again. This is why it's so hard for tradesmen to advance in this city," he explained to the room at large: "timidity, lack of initiative; that, and the refusal of nobles to let them marry their daughters. You see," he told Flavia, as if their conversation had never been interrupted, "the nobles are going nowhere. The people who've actually done something to get the comforts they enjoy are the ones who are worth something: the merchants and craftsmen—not to mention the farmers, though you can't get rich off little patches of land, you have to have lots of it, and get others to work it for you—You didn't know that, I suppose?"

"I'm not a historian, or an agrarianist. Go on, though; I'm fascinated."

"If the nobles had any sense, they'd marry into families who knew how to fold things properly, instead of working so hard to marry back into each other."

"The trouble with you," the Ugly Girl said, "is that you think you know just what everyone should do, don't you?"

The Mad Duke smiled at her. His face was bright and sharp, smooth and glittering. "Yes," he said, "I do."

"And what," she said, "if you're wrong?"

"And what," he said, "if I'm not?"

WHEN MY NEXT LESSON CAME, I WAS READY. "MASTER Venturus," I told him, "I deeply regret any unpleasantness between us." I'd never said anything like that before; I'd copied it from a speech of Mangrove's, the lying villain, because although he was at core a rotten being, no one could fault him for style. (I did, however, leave out the bit about passion overwhelming, because it did not suit.) "I hope you will forgive me, and consent to teach me as before."

The foreigner frowned. "Venturus is here, no? Why else here but to teach? You think he come to drink chocolate and pass the biscuit?"

So that was all right. We did the standing-still exercise with his serious blade again. But this time I remembered that, however weird he was, Venturus was a master swordsman. He wouldn't hurt me unless he wanted to. I admired his form. He was in perfect control of his body, the sword an extension of it; he could repeat the same move precisely, and he did, without wavering. Once I'd realized that, I started to enjoy the illusion of danger, the way his blade hissed past my cheek, tickled my sleeve.

"Good!" he said. "Because this time, you know no angry. You know no fear. You trust Venturus. But you not always fight Venturus. So you learn you trust you skin. Know where man's sword is all times. Know how close, how far."

This time the sword came from above. My whole scalp prickled with the sensation as it came at me. I felt the blade in my hair, like a leaf that had fallen, or a bug.

I knew when it was gone, before I even looked to see. It was not only that I no longer felt it, or that I saw him move. Or, I suppose, it was both of those things, and another I can't quite explain. Anyway, the sword was gone, and nothing in my body or Venturus's said it was coming at me. It was the oddest thing. I unclenched the hand at my side.

"Now you try," he said, standing perfectly still.

I retrieved a practice sword, harmless and dull; but before I could swing he was out of my reach, his sword up and guarding against me.

"You no say 'No move,'" he taunted, like a child. I felt a slow flush of anger. "Venturus always move," he grinned, "no matter you say." But then he turned to display a bulky figure behind him, swathed in a cloak. Theatrically, he whipped the cloak off to reveal a straw man. "So *here* this your partner to practice. He no listen, but he no move!"

I swung my blade at the straw figure, and was proud when I stopped the sword just short of it without wavering much. I targeted another point on it, and again I made it. I'd almost forgotten my teacher was there, when he said, "How? How? This you practice you chopping down trees? No!" But I did not fear his roaring. In fact, I thought he sounded amused. "Is practice now. Once again with the guard, the feint, the parry—but this time, when you strike—hit home!"

In guard, I glared at the straw man. If he tried a direct cut I would do—thus—and counter with—thus—feinting so that he changed his line—and

I plunged the sword home into his heart! The tip went in so deep it was almost out the other side. I looked at it half in shame, half in satisfaction.

"How?" Venturus roared again. "What trickery is this? These are not patterns Venturus teach you, this mummery-flummery dancing about! Venturus is no dance-master. You think you partner is some girl-doll to play with, you make up you move? Why you laugh?"

The very last doll I loved was a china-faced lady with painted blue eyes. I used to dress Fifi in stylish gowns made from my mother's old dress scraps.

"Again," he said. "You show you move, just like I teach."

What sort of costume would I dress this huge straw doll in? Perhaps Betty would help me make a sweeping cloak as black as night. Using the patterns of attack and defense that he had taught me, in just the right order I had practiced many times, I stabbed Huge Fifi right through the heart.

Venturus nodded. "See, now, when you follow Venturus teaching, see how sweet she is?" He almost sounded coaxing. "See, how swift and clean is the stroke? The pure attack? The sureness of the thing that there is?"

I grinned at him. It did work, after all. "Good!" he cried. "I go now. You follow teaching, is good. No follow, no practice, you hear me?" I nodded. "Bad habits ruin sword. Practice practice practice…now!"

I waited 'til he was gone; then I stared hard at Fifi. The straw head was just a featureless orb. Could I find somewhere a wig with inky curls? "You," I said, "may live to regret this day. Or, if not this day, the day that you met me. They are much the same. For two entered by that window, but only one of us shall leave by it. Have at you!"

IT WAS AN AWFUL, AWFUL DAY. ARTEMISIA COULDN'T SAY why, but it was. Her new dress had been delivered, and when she tried it on, she was convinced that the blue, so becoming in the shop, made her look like a frump, or an old lady. She actually cried over that, until Dorrie, her maid, in despair went and fetched her mother, who swore that it became her better than Lady Hetley's rose taffeta, which she had so much admired at Jane's barge party. Artemisia sniffled and allowed Dorrie to pin some ecru lace to the collar, and thought perhaps that did help. As she stared at herself in

the mirror, she realized she had a spot coming out on her chin. Her gasp of horror was interrupted by her brother Robert storming into the room, calling, "Mother! Mother, I've been all over the house looking for you. Kirk says I cannot have the carriage, because Artemisia wants it to pay calls."

"Indeed she does," Lady Fitz-Levi said, "and doesn't she look like a picture?"

Her brother bit back a nasty comment about what kind of picture his sister made. "It is intolerable, Mother. I told you two days ago I needed the carriage to go out to the races today."

"Why don't you ride there, dear?"

"Mother, no one rides to the races! Where is Artie going, anyway, just across the street or something? Why can't she walk?"

"Oh, it's all right for *me* to get splashed with mud, is it?" Artemisia cried. "You pig, Robert! Well, it hardly matters, does it, since I have nothing to wear and I'm the ugliest thing in creation. Take your carriage, then—I just won't go. I'm never going anywhere again. And get out of my room, you pig."

Lady Fitz-Levi motioned Robert to follow her out into the hall.

"What on earth has gotten into her? She used to like going to parties."

"You must be patient," their mother explained. "She is a bit under the weather today. She did not receive an invitation to the Galings' musical luncheon, and she particularly wanted one, because a certain—ah, gentleman said he would be there."

"Oh really? Who?"

"Never you mind." His mother put a finger to her cheek. "The less said on that front, the better."

"Come on, Mother, maybe I know him."

"I'm not sure you do—he is a rather plodding young man, not for your set at all."

"If he's plodding, what does she see in him?"

"My concern is what he sees in her. He was starstruck, moonstruck, and paid her all sorts of compliments at the Montague ball. Trust Helena Montague to invite half the city, even ineligibles. I made the mistake of telling Mia not to take him seriously, so of course now she is making a meal of it. I would have done better to keep my mouth shut. Don't *ever* have a daughter."

Robert laughed. "I shall have several, and send them to you for advice. But maybe a dull, plodding sort of fellow is just what Artie needs to settle down and be happy with."

"Don't be patronizing, Robert. Dull is not what your sister needs. And most particularly, not dull and poor with romantic connections." Robert raised his eyebrows. His mother nodded. "Gregory Talbert. Yes. The most unmarriageable young noble in the city."

"*And* Tremontaine's oldest nephew. Who's to say there's not a duchy in his future?"

"Tremontaine, for one. There's a feud between the families. The duke has the privilege of naming his heir, and I doubt it will be any of his sister's children."

"What about the daughter, that girl he had brought here?"

His mother pressed her lips together. "You don't see her at any of the parties for the young ladies, do you?" She did not mention, even to Robert, that she had already intercepted one letter from the Lady Katherine to Artemisia, frantic and flowery and badly spelt, hinting at dire fates and desperate measures. She profoundly hoped that there would be no others. "Whatever the duke means to do with her, it can't be anything decent."

"The brother seems a solid enough fellow…Don't worry, Mama, when I see him I'll try to warn him off."

"Thank you, Robbie. I know I can trust both my children to do the right thing. Anything you can do to help your sister right now…you see, you cannot underestimate the importance of her always being in her best looks and spirits at this particular time."

"Oh, she's always a huge hit. I don't see what the fuss is about."

"Robbie." His mother sighed. "Darling. May I speak to you as an adult?" He drew himself up. "All right. Listen. What happens to Artemisia this Season or the next will determine the course of her entire life from now on. She is on display, everything about her: her clothes, her hair, her teeth, her laugh, her voice…so that some gentleman can choose whether he wants to make her the mistress of his household and the mother of his heirs. Think of it as—oh, I don't know, as a horse that has only one race to win. If she marries well, she will be comfortable and happy. If she makes a poor choice, or fails to attract a worthy man, the rest of her life will be a misery. I know you young people think that, ah, physical attraction is enough. But when

you're forty and the parent of a brood, if your spouse is poor or poor of judgment, believe me, there is no romance there."

She leaned forward confidentially. "Now, you and I know what a tremendous success Artemisia is, once she gets out there. You know no one has anything but good to say about our darling—and you'd tell me if they did, wouldn't you, Robbie, dear? But a woman alone, in her boudoir, well, she suffers certain anxieties. So you see, we all need to be very kind and helpful to her, right now. You understand that, darling, don't you?"

"If it will help get her married and out of the house, I shall do everything in my power," her brother said devoutly. And though his mother said he didn't mean it, and that there was no friend like a sister to see you through life's ups and down, he rather thought he did, and left, nearly colliding with the footman coming up the stairs with flowers for his sister.

Dorrie brought them in to her, hoping her mistress would be cheered by them. And indeed, Artemisia's face brightened when she saw the fine bouquet of roses and freesias. If a Certain Person had sent them, it would make up for everything, and she might hope again. With trembling hands (and with her mother standing by), she unfurled the note from the center of the bouquet. She could imagine already the soft words from one whose eye had caught hers, whose hand had gently caressed hers, and whose heart, perhaps, might someday win her.

"Oh no!" she shrieked. The note was signed *Terence Monteith*.

She cast herself upon the bed, sobbing, "I *hate* Terence Monteith! I hate everyone! It's all a disaster! Everybody hates me. Oh, leave me alone!"

In the end, they had to put her to bed with tea and a little brandy. Had Robert only been a little more patient, he might have had the carriage, after all.

Artemisia curled up with her favorite book, and cried, and wondered whether any man would ever love her enough to risk his soul's honor for her sake, and why swordsmen were so *boring* these days.

chapter IX

MY UNCLE'S SERVANT MARCUS HAD BEEN RIGHT: the gardens of Tremontaine House were beautiful, and beautifully tended, delightful and various. There were well-kempt paths and carefully clipped bushes punctuated by classical sculptures. Some of their stories I knew; other figures were quite obscure, but seemed to be involved in unlikely couplings. Perhaps they were a joke, or came from books only my brothers were allowed to read. There were also arcs and swirls of flowers and leafy plants of different heights and colors, set throughout with benches and bowers, though no one ever was sitting in them. And long grassy alleys ran down to the river. The more I practiced my sword, the more I felt like running down them, especially as the last of summer began to take on the bite of autumn.

In my boy's clothes I could hurtle along the banks and slopes without pausing to think about my skirts. Stone walls were easy to get over. I never had to go around, and even falling down never meant a torn hem or ruffle. I did tear a sleeve once, but that was a piece of foolishness, stretching my arms out over my head and rolling all the way down the grass to the river landing. The duke's barge floated there, wrapped in canvas. I wondered when I'd get to ride in it. I mended the sleeve myself as best I could, but it showed. When Betty took it away from me I thought she was angry and might tell the duke, but she only had it mended by a real tailor, good as new.

If my family had had the money for lessons, I might have learned to sketch and paint well enough to portray the gardens. If Artemisia had been a true friend to me, I might have invited her by now to do just that, for I was sure she had all the accomplishments. If ever I saw my uncle the Mad Duke again, perhaps I would ask him why I could not have a drawing master, in addition to Master Venturus? I could not spend every minute on

swordplay. Why should he mind if I learned watercolors or something nice in my spare time?

Certainly I was not failing in my lessons. Venturus watched carefully as I strove against my straw doll, Fifi. He gave me pointers, and I began to realize that despite the bluster, his advice was always solid. I couldn't help giving Fifi a personality and clever countermoves to go with it—one day, when Venturus was being unpleasant about a failed move of mine, I said, "But what else am I to do when Fif—when my opponent comes at me with a high disarm?"

"Here." The swordmaster took a weapon from the rack. "I show." He came at me with a high disarm, which I failed to disengage and pass under until he showed me how. And, so simply, that was how we started sparring together.

I came to know the bright blade, first as something like a dance-partner as we rehearsed our patterned strokes and counters, parries and ripostes, and then as an unexpected visitor, to be anticipated in a half-breath, and turned as brusquely away.

The hardest part was looking in my teacher's eyes as I fought, but this he said I must do, although it felt horribly bold and immodest.

"No watch sword," he rasped, "watch man. Man is mind of sword."

As often as we sparred, my teacher grumbled that I was a waste of his time. "I fall asleep practicing you, duke-boy. Other students of Venturus learn on each other. You all alone with straw man and me, too much alone. Lucky have great teacher, very lucky he be practicing you. Why you crazy father make you live alone?"

"He's not my father," I said automatically for what was surely the hundredth time. "I'm not a boy."

"Venturus not fight with no girls." He raised his sword high, and pointed it downwards to signal a pause in the bout, so he could attack me with his temper. "You got no respect for teacher, you! Other students beg Venturus for lessons. You *argue* him. Ha!"

In the end, always we went back to practice, all morning now. I liked the feel of my teacher giving way on the floor before me, even if it was only an exercise. But I thought I deserved a chance at watercolors, too.

THE DUKE'S LOVER SAID, "I WISH YOU WOULD MAKE UP your mind."

He shivered as the duke ran a cold finger down his back. "My mind is quite made up. The problem is, you don't like the way it's gone."

"I want to stay here in Riverside."

"And so do I. But not tonight. My poet must have dignity. He'll have more standing on the Hill."

"The whole city knows what you are. Which house you do it in hardly makes a difference."

The duke said, "You don't like my ideas, you don't like my choices…the truth is, you don't like me very much, Alcuin, do you?"

"Of course I do, I love you."

"It's all right. I don't like you much, either."

"Why do you keep me, then?"

"Who said anything about keeping you?"

Alcuin bent his beautiful head over the duke's manicured hand, sweeping it with his lips. "Please…" And Tremontaine did not push him away.

When the duke slept, though, Alcuin dressed, and scribbled a little note and propped it on the duke's dressing table, and ordered up a carriage to take him to the Hill. In the duke's bedroom, the curtains were always drawn; his lover was almost surprised to find that outside it was daylight.

They knew him at Tremontaine House, and he still wore their master's ring. They let him in, and nobody followed him through the corridors to the duke's apartments. There he looked for papers, any papers that might serve his needs and embarrass his lover, but he could not find what he wanted there, any more than he had in Riverside. He proceeded to the library and opened the likeliest books, but all that they contained were words. He had expected the room to be empty, and started violently when he heard the crackle of paper.

It was only a boy, pretty and well dressed, with astonishingly long hair—a student, then—sitting in the window seat with a book. As he prided himself on his ability to deal with any situation, Alcuin bowed to him. It was not, after all, as though he had been doing anything but looking at books. That was what one did in a library. He'd just have to wait for privacy for the desk to divulge its contents.

The boy got up hurriedly, shoving the book under a cushion. "Oh!" he said. "Is my uncle back?"

Alcuin stared. "And who is your uncle?"

"The duke, I mean," the boy stammered. "You're—you're Alcuin, aren't you?"

The man smiled, not unflattered to be known. "You've come early for the party, child." He moved in a little closer. Yes, you could see the family resemblance if you looked hard, though it was mostly in the tone of the skin, the setting of the eyes.

"Were you looking for something in here? Perhaps I could help you." This boy's lineaments were soft and round where the duke's were sharp-cut. In fact—

"No!" Alcuin snapped. "You keep out of my affairs." He should have recognized her sooner. Those silly clothes confused him.

The duke's niece boldly faced him, looking at him with a direct gaze he found disconcerting.

"There is no call to be so angry," she said. "When will my uncle be back?"

"I—" But he could not say he did not know. "Soon. In time for his party. Will you be performing the comic theatricals?"

He had the satisfaction of seeing her blush. But she stood her ground, and so the library was closed to him for now.

He returned to the duke's own chambers upstairs, which he found now occupied by their master in a snarling foul humor, attended by his boy, Marcus.

He was preparing to leave them when the duke said, "Stay out of the way tonight, Alcuin."

"Why? Are you afraid I'll draw attention from your precious poet?"

"I'm afraid you'll bore them to death. Nobody wants to hear your opinion on meter and verse. It is all too painfully obvious that you start thinking of these things only after other people have begun to talk about them."

"You're screwing your poet, too, aren't you?"

"If I am, you'll still have nothing interesting to say."

Alcuin went off to kick his valet, who surely had arrived by now.

"And stay out of my papers," Tremontaine said to the closed door behind him.

I HAD NOT ACTUALLY BEEN INVITED TO THE DUKE'S party, but I was sure that was an oversight. I lived here, after all. And it would be a literary party, the servants said, not some debauched revelry, so there was no reason for me not to attend.

Except for one thing. My clothes.

"You have perfectly nice clothes, my lady," Betty said grumpily, "lovely ones the duke had made for you special." She was grumpy because the house staff were all busy getting ready for the influx of guests, and no one was listening to her stories of past mistakes. She'd gotten into the wine already, and it was making her stubborn. No matter how hard I explained to her that it was out of the question for me to appear before my fellow nobles dressed so outlandishly, she refused to listen. Clearly nothing short of a direct order from the duke himself would persuade her to retrieve even my meanest old gown out of wherever she'd hidden them all. I decided to go get that order from him myself.

I knew where the duke's room was. I marched right up to it and readied myself to knock.

The door opened, and a boy slipped out. It was Marcus, the servant about my age. He stood between me and the door, his back tightly to it, as if shielding it from me, or me from it.

"I just wanted to—" I began, but he held up his hand and looked concerned. "I wouldn't," he said. "Not right now."

"But it's—"

He shook his head. "Honestly. Trust me. Later. There's about to be an explosion." The door shuddered behind him. "And I have to go and get egg whites. Later." He fled down the hall one way, and I went back the other, sighing. So much for the party, then.

With the kitchen in chaos, it was easy to sneak in and supply myself with provender. I shut myself in my room to wait the evening out. I heard carriages arriving, names being called, people laughing. There was a long silence as they left the main hall for dinner; not a huge party, then. I ate apples and biscuits, watching the ever-glorious sunset over the river. As I lit a candle, I heard servants passing in the main hall below, lighting the many

candelabra. It occurred to me, then, that I might easily watch undetected from the shadows at the top of the stairs.

It was just like when I was a child, sneaking out to the banisters to watch the grownups at my parents' parties. People had begun to mill about the hall's great gameboard, few enough at first that I could discern individual voices, fragments of conversation:

"…Godwin doing here? I thought…"

"…well, in poetry, if nothing else…"

"…not if you held a candle to my feet!"

"Bernhard! Never knew you liked poetry."

"I don't. Wait and see."

"…I knew he was pretty, but my god!"

"I doubt he'll last much longer. But consider, my dear…"

As I got to the top of the stairs, the horrible Alcuin came staggering up them from the hall. Even I could see that he was very drunk, his eyes and feet unsteady, his lovely face slack with incomprehension. He was without his coat, and his shirt was loose. His hair was weirdly spiky, as if he'd gotten egg whites in it.

I stepped aside. He seemed to be reaching for the banister, but he grabbed my wrist instead, leaning hard, as if he would have fallen without me. He did not look happy to see me. "Tremontaine," he slurred. "Another one." The weight of his grip was pulling me down. I couldn't shake him off. There were people downstairs in the hall just below us; I could get help if I needed it. But I would rather not let them know I was there. "Another Bitch Duchess."

Stupidly, I laughed. "I'm not anyone."

He pulled me to him. Amazing, how someone so beautifully made could be so loathsome. He began calling me names. I protested, "I haven't done anything to you. Stop it. Leave me alone." It was as though he couldn't hear me. If I screamed, everyone would come running, but it would be so embarrassing. I brought my heel down, hard, on his foot.

Alcuin howled, but no one heard it because of the uproar that began downstairs: ladies' shrieks mingled with cries of delight; more laughter, and shouts to come look. Alcuin staggered down the hall to throw up, and I raced to the railing to see.

Two men were standing in the middle of the hall with drawn swords. Crouched, they began to circle each other, taking each other's measure. There were no tips on their blades. The sharp steel was pointed at each other's faces. This was it, then: real swordsmen, my first swordfight! I clutched the railing, looking down, half afraid of being seen, but more afraid to miss it.

Right under me, people were edged against the wall to watch. Their voices drifted up: "Not a chance…The dark one's got the reach."

"But look at that arm."

"Fifty on the dark one—what's his name? Anyone know his name?"

"You know who it *isn't*."

"Fifty, done."

Both swordsmen looked decent to me. One dark, one fair, and the fair one seemed edgy. *Fear hurts sword.* But was he really nervous, or just cautious? He seemed alert to everything, every possible move. That could be to his advantage. The dark one had a lot of force. He might overspend that, though.

"Who else is game? Hurry up, before they're through."

There was a clash of weapons. Were they trying each other's mettle, or just making noise to get attention? Steel on steel rang out like a pure bell, long and long in the Great Hall.

"Nice form, there. Good job."

"And twenty more!"

I saw my uncle the duke, his arm around the shoulders of a rather pale young man who was clutching a bundle of papers. In the ringing silence the young man squeaked, "This is ridiculous. I am sure there was no insult intended."

The fighters began circling again.

"But a moment ago, you were sure there was," the duke said.

"I should not have said so."

The dark one made a feint, which the other backed off from.

"In real life, my sweet poet," the duke said as the swordsmen circled, "words can never be undone."

"But these men—to fight over such a thing—it's ridiculous."

"You are my guest," the duke said smoothly. "Your poetry was challenged in my house. It's lucky there were swordsmen here to take up the matter.

Look out for Finch, the blond one; he's defending your verse's virtue."

A guest shouted, "All right, boys, let's go, let's see some action!"

The dark man's point was steady, pointed at Finch's chest.

"Let's have it!" a man's voice cried. "I've got money on this, let's go!"

Finch pressed suddenly forward, too quickly. It was a flashy move designed to startle your opponent and go right through his defenses, but it only works if you make them think you're doing something else, and he didn't take the time. Finch's opponent had no trouble blocking the blow. He parried and thrust home.

"Blood!" a guest called, and others took it up: *Blood! First blood!*

Finch staggered back. A dark stain spread on his white shirt. His opponent stood very still, his sword lowered. There was silence in the hall.

The duke said to the poet, "You've lost. Or, rather, Finch has lost in your person. It comes to the same thing. Unless you want them to go past First Blood to the Death? There's still a chance—"

"No," said the poet.

Finch dropped his sword then, and pressed the free hand to his side. The winning swordsman bowed to the duke.

I gripped the stair rail. I wanted to make them do it over again, do it right this time; but it wasn't an exercise. I wasn't sure what it was.

Finch sat down and put his head between his knees. Servants passed through the circle with bandages and water for him.

"Well, that's it, then," the duke announced loudly, and, just as loudly to the poet, "I'm afraid you will have to leave."

"But—why?"

"Your poetry turns out to be awful. I wouldn't have thought it, but there it is. Finch is bleeding."

The poet laughed uncertainly. "I see. Very amusing. But it's not real; you can't take it seriously."

The duke just looked at him. "My dear. Here on the Hill, I'm afraid we take it very seriously. A nobleman of the city brought your poetry's virtue into question—'Duller than a rainy Tuesday and twice as long' was the way you put it, Bernhard, I believe? A challenge was issued. There was a duel, and the swordsman defending the honor of your verse was defeated."

"But—one man sticking another with a sword cannot change my poetry from good to bad just like that."

"The duel is the ultimate arbiter of truth. Where men's judgment may be called into question, the opinion of the sword always holds fast." Half the room was listening to him, amused; the rest were settling debts or debating the fight. If these people didn't stop laughing and gambling soon, I wasn't going to be able to stand it. "If you stayed—well, you could stay. If you like. But it gives license for people to be very rude to you. I don't think you would enjoy it. No, really, you had better go."

They brought the poet his cloak and hat. My uncle saw him to the door himself; as they passed beneath the stairs, I saw his ringed hands pass the poet a small heavy purse.

I wondered if the poet would think it had been worth it.

"Bernhard!" the tall duke turned and shouted into the crowd. "That was not very nice."

"You are ungracious." A large well-dressed man detached himself from the throng. "I thought you would enjoy a good fight better than whining poetry."

"*You…thought?*" An invisible wind had blown the duke from hot to cold. The room itself felt chilly, and the guests were still. "Let me ask you, Bernhard: do you *think* the Lords Justiciar would be pleased to hear that you called formal challenge on some poor scribbling fool who, as far as they are concerned, has no honor to defend?"

Lord Bernhard had the sort of heavy face that turns red with any emotion. "Hardly a matter for the Court of Honor, I would have thought."

"Or did you mean the challenge for me, here in my own house?"

"I had not known you for such a traditionalist, Tremontaine," Bernhard said, earning a laugh from some of them. "Although," he went on, "I suppose the purity of swordsmen is a passion of yours, isn't it, my lord?"

The laughter stopped. The duke spoke quietly, but I had no trouble hearing him. "Bernhard. Let me do a little thinking for you. You are in my house. Finch is not my only sword. If I call challenge on you this very moment, who will come forward to fight on your behalf?"

Bernhard forced a laugh.

A nice-looking man in blue said, "Tremontaine, really; you know the world. The Court doesn't attend to such trivia. And I am sure Bernhard meant no insult to you or to your house."

I would have done whatever he suggested; even the duke shrugged mildly. "I am not insulted, Godwin. When I am, Bernhard, I'll send you formal notice. I just wanted to point out that this fight was not strictly legal. And since Tremontaine sits on the Court of Honor (when I have a mind to), I could invoke the Lords Justiciar to attend to such 'trivia.'" He turned to the room, holding up his hands as if he were in a play: "Good heavens; if I, a known scoffer and reprobate, am the only one left willing to uphold the ancient forms, what hope is there for any of us? Who else are we planning to extend the privilege of the sword to?"

There was an embarrassed silence. My uncle let it last a long time before he said cheerfully, "Oh, well. Now that you have taken our original entertainment from us, Bernhard, I'm afraid I must ask you to supply the lack. What can you do?"

"I?" The man was bright red.

"Can you fight? Well, of course not. You do breed dogs, but nobody wants to watch that—not unless they're a member of your Gentlemen's Self-Pleasure League." I heard a woman shriek with embarrassed laughter. "Heavens, Bernhard, what *can* you do? Surely you can…read. Yes, I think you had better read to us. Something of my lady," he bowed to a serious-looking woman, "my lady Evaine's choosing. If you will follow me to the library, we'll find many excellent volumes there. You can regale us with… poetry, I think, don't you, my lady?"

And so, one by one, the party and its guests passed out of my sight. Of the two swordsmen no sign remained. Not even a smear of blood marked the black-and-white patterned floor of the hall of Tremontaine House. Instead there were fragments of flowers, a dropped fan, half a pastry, several buttons, a comb and a broken glass.

I took off my clothes and got into bed. I felt the hard lump of the book under my pillow, *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*. How could I sleep with that thing sticking into my head? There was not a grain of truth in it, none. Swordplay was two fools hacking at each other with razors until one of them was hurt. I took the book out and hurled it across the room.

chapter X

TREMONTAINE HOUSE WAS QUIET THE NEXT MORNING, not because it was uninhabited, but because its occupants were mostly asleep. Everything wet or edible had already been cleared away; everything valuable had been cleaned.

Only one large, high-ceilinged room had its curtains pulled back to let in the long cheerful ribbons of morning sunlight. Outside the tall windows, a garden beckoned. But the muscular black-bearded man stood with his back to it. Occasionally he would spin around as if to challenge the view, stamping one foot on the floor to make the decorated ceiling ring, then turn again towards the door. Once he sprang from a crouch and leapt almost the length of the room. He hummed disapproval into his mustache. He inspected the rack of glittering swords, first overall, then blade by blade, looking for rust spots or fingerprints. As he found none, he permitted himself a smile.

Because he heard the door open, and saw who it was reflected in a blade, he did not turn around to look at the girl dressed in sober blue-grey linen. When she had shut the door behind her, then he turned, and let her see the smile.

"Clean blades," he said. "Very good."

"Thank you."

"Well? You are a statue? Pick up sword!"

The girl fixed on his face the steady gaze that he had taught her. "I will not fight today."

"How, not fight? You will not fight? Maybe we will play at dice, then, ah? Or learn the dance? *Booger*, you will not fight!"

She did not smile. "No. I will not be going on with these lessons."

"What lessons, then?" He thrust a finger in her face like a dagger. "You have some other lessons? Your mad father think you are too good now for Venturus, that you will learn more better from some street-puke swordsboy indeed? Ha!"

"Ha," she repeated tonelessly. "Do you know, Master, you sound like a jealous lover?"

"*Do you know…*" he mimicked. He took a step back, with a little bow. "But who have we here? Is it not some fine-aired lady, indeed? This lady I do not know, though she wear the britches."

"I will be sure that you are properly paid," she went on. "I am certain that there is money here for that. And your other students will no doubt be glad of your time."

"But this is grave." He stopped his posturing and met her gaze with one of his own. "This is no girlish humor, I think."

She dropped her eyes. "No. It is not."

"Why you no wish fight?"

She turned away. "You wouldn't understand."

"Ha. Girlish humor after all. You are in love?"

She spun in quick riposte. "Certainly not! Love? I shall never be in love, if people always think it makes you stupid! No, I'll tell you what it is—" And it was her turn to lean in to him, her face closer to his than a swordsman would normally allow—"I've seen them. Real ones. Last night, at the party here. Two swordsmen. A duel. It was disgusting."

"Blood. A mess. Now you are afraid—"

"I am *not* afraid. I see twice as much blood every month. It was the duel—I told you you wouldn't understand."

"I am not paid to understand you humors." He'd pulled a blade from the rack and began circling her with it. "You not afraid, ha?"

"No, I'm not. But I will *not* be made a show of."

"A show, ha?" He jabbed at her with the padded tip, feinted and jabbed again. "Just a show?"

"That's all any of it is, a show for people to laugh at. It was a *game* to them, that's all, just some stupid game! They place *bets*—stop that."

"Bets?" He was forcing her back a pace, two paces, now that she had begun to take notice of his blade.

"Bets on the outcome—two perfectly good—Ouch!" Her back was to the rack; he'd jabbed her in the shoulder. "Perfectly good swordsmen, nothing wrong with them, but they were doing it for—"

"Money? You think men should not fight for money, little girl?" He backed off, making midgelike circles with the tip of his blade. "Men without nice dukes should beg they money in streets, before fight they for pay?"

"He's not paying *me*," she said tightly. "I don't know what *your* fee is, but he's not paying me. I'm supposed to do it for free, to make a show of myself to amuse—to amuse—" The swordmaster feinted high, low, elaborate little spirals of disengage and riposte up and down his target, annoying as summer flies. "I said, stop that."

"What for? No peoples looking here. Just us, little boy duchess."

The sword was in her hand, and she attacked. Venturus fell back before her. She tried to kill him, despite the blunted tips, and he fought with a grin splitting his beard. She went for the eyes, the throat, but he was quick in his defense. Around and around the room they went, and he let her tire herself out with every trick she knew. He waited until she began to slow, and then Venturus stepped in with one perfect thrust.

She flung her blade into the corner. It rattled and clanged.

"Not too sad a fight," said Master Venturus. "Now we will stop for awhile. Good day, Lady Katherine."

And she was alone, sweating, in the practice room with the wet rabbits on the door.

I WAS AWAKENED EARLY THE NEXT MORNING IN THE COLD grey light. The fire had not yet warmed the room any. Betty was bustling about, folding clothes and putting them in a trunk. "Come," said Betty, "hurry up, dear. My lord says you're to travel. The carriage waits."

There was no point in arguing with her. If he said travel, travel I must. I let her button me into my chilly traveling clothes topped with long boots, hat, heavy cloak. A mist was on the river.

Into the carriage with bread, a hot flask and blankets. Betty waving to me; a cluck of the coachman, a creaking of gates and Tremontaine House was behind me. The city passed away like a series of pictures; then, for the first time in many weeks, I was in the open country. The sun was coming up, a golden haze of warmth. Wrapped in the blankets, I dozed, woke to a stop for the horses, stretched my legs and sat the rest of the afternoon, watching as unfamiliar countrysides of fields of golden wheat gave way to streams and cows and orchards. When the shadows started to stretch across the road, they stopped the coach to consult with me.

"Shall we push on to Highcombe tonight, my lady? It will be dark. But there's a nice little inn not far along, if you'd rather stop for the night."

It was all one to me. But I knew when I was being suggested to. We stopped at the nice little inn, and I got a good dinner and a reasonable bed. I did not ask the coachman or the groom what Highcombe was, could not think of a way to do it that would not betray the fact that I had no idea what was going on. Until they had named our destination, I had dared to think that perhaps I was going home—a failure, maybe, but going home, still. A trunk of my belongings was lashed up behind us; wherever I was being sent, it was not for a brief visit.

The next morning we rose again early, and by the time the sun shone watery above in a cloudy midmorning, the carriage was rolling through the gates of a lodge and down a graveled alley lined with tall trees. I caught glimpses of a great stone house, three times the size of my old one. But instead of rounding the drive to its front steps, we suddenly went off the path and began bumping over the grass to the other side of the house. We pulled up before a little cottage tacked onto the wall, with its own wooden door painted a cozy blue.

I stood in the damp grass and smelt earth and apples crossing with hay and horses. It wasn't quite the smell of home, but it wasn't city, either. Stretching away from the blue door across from the lawn (now beribboned with the silver marks of our carriage wheels) was an apple orchard in one direction and fields in another. A stream cut through them both. The fields were silvery with long, wet grass; it had rained here in the night, and clouds still lingered. Coming across the fields I saw a man with a staff, his head uncovered.

"There he is," said the coachman, and hailed him: "Master!"

Fine drops of mist ornamented the man's dark hair. He raised his head and leapt the stream, and came to us.

The footman spoke. "The duke's greetings, Master. He presents his niece, the Lady Katherine. She will be studying with you, he says. And we've brought you some things from the city."

"Thank you," said the man. "You can put them inside."

The blue door was not locked. I stood looking at my new tutor and wondered what I would be studying. He had the earth-caked hands of a gardener, well-shaped fingers squared off at the tips. His face was unshaven but not yet bearded. He did not seem to mind my staring, though his own gaze was less direct. I felt he was looking past me.

"Are you Janine's daughter?" he asked.

"You know my mother!"

"No. But Alec's spoken of her."

"Who's Alec?"

The man smiled. "The duke."

Another name. "You're his friend? Is this Highcombe?"

"Yes, it's his house. One of them. I live here."

The men had finished their deliveries. Even my trunk was stowed inside. "Will that be all, sir? Will you need anything else?"

"Thank you. Nothing else, if you've brought everything I asked for."

"All in the chest, according to my list. The spoons are wrapped in the linen. We can wait if you like, but our orders are to return to town as soon as convenient."

"That's all right, then. Thank you; good-bye."

I did not feel melancholy or afraid as the Tremontaine carriage pulled away, leaving me in a strange place with a strange man. Indeed, I could hardly wait for them to go, so I could find out what would happen next.

Part II

HIGHCOMBE

chapter I

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT WAS THAT HE ATTACKED me. His staff swung up and I ducked, my hands over my head.

The staff hovered in midair, brushing the edge of my cloak.

"You haven't been studying long," he said.

"Not very," I agreed, adding, "You aren't supposed to do that. You didn't call for my guard, or issue a challenge, or anything!"

"Sword against staff is tricky," he observed. "But you didn't even reach for your blade."

"I'm not wearing one."

"Even then. You aren't in the habit, and that's dangerous. Go put one on right now, and then we can get you fed and rested."

None of my baggage was long enough to contain a sword. I followed him through the blue door, into the little cottage.

"Climb that narrow flight of stairs," my host said. "At the top, in the corner of the room, left of the window, you'll find a chest with blades wrapped in oilcloth."

I had to open the shutters before I could see anything. It was a very plain bedroom. The chest was plain as well, but what was inside it made my breath catch. From the protective cloth I unwrapped long gleaming blades of extraordinary beauty, with hilts both plain and intricate. I'd never seen anything like them. Everything about them was sharp, including the tips. One, with a dragon's head on the pommel, looked just like the sort of thing Fabian would carry, or someone in *Lives of the Heroic Swordsmen*.

I called downstairs, "May I choose any one I want?"

"No." His voice was firm but amused. "Try the twisted basket hilt; it's probably closest to the right weight for you."

I stood at the top of the stairs. They were horribly steep, not much more than a pitched ladder, really. If I slipped or stumbled, the sharp edges in my hand could turn against me.

"Had I better find a scabbard?" I asked nervously.

"Bottom of the same chest. Leather, and not too gaudy, youngling."

Getting the long sword into the soft scabbard was a bit like getting a bootie onto a baby's foot: neither was very interested in helping, though in the end they fit together just fine. I came carefully down the steep stairs.

"Don't I need something to stick it in? I've got a belt, but there's a hanging thing, too, isn't there?"

"Oh, dear," the man sighed. "He wasn't thinking, was he?"

Whether he meant the duke or Venturus was all one to me; I was just glad he didn't think it was my fault. Reaching for his staff, the man rose suddenly, and I jumped, clutching the sword to myself. To my surprise, "I'm sorry," the man said. "I'll try to move more slowly, until you learn me better. I was just going to get you a hanger."

He stood closer to me than Venturus ever had, fitting the sword's hanger on my belt, and the sword in with it. His fingers were steady and sure, like a stableman's harnessing a horse; he didn't even have to look, and I felt his breath warm across my hair. When he moved away, there was a part attached to me that had not been there before. It moved when I moved, like a cat's tail—though without any of its grace!

He put a loaf of bread on the table, and a block of yellow cheese. When I sat on the bench I had to move the sword out of the way to keep from sitting on it, which wasn't as easy as you'd think. I looked to see if the man was laughing at me, but he was cutting bread. It was good bread, and the cheese was good, too.

"What about a knife?" he asked. "Did he give you a knife, at least?"

"I—I have a penknife." It had been a New Year's gift from my brother.

"No sword, no knife…Use this." He handed me his. It was well worn and rather ugly, with a plain wooden handle, but the blade very bright and thin with repeated grinding.

"I couldn't take your knife," I began to demur politely, but he interrupted, "I've got more. One with a dragon's head, one like a falcon…I won't miss this one. Don't lose it, though; wear it on your belt." He caught my moment of hesitation as if it were a ball I'd thrown. "—In a sheath, of course. Oh, dear."

When he got up from the table I jumped and fumbled for my sword, which took the bench up and over with it. This time, he did laugh. He sounded so helpless, as if I'd just crippled him by telling a brilliant joke very well, that I laughed, too.

"Never mind," he said when he could speak again. "You're just going to give yourself a stomachache. Learn to walk with it, first, and then we'll see about defending yourself."

I was so horribly grateful that I had to stand up for my pride. "I can fight. I fought Master Venturus."

"Did you? Who won?"

"He did," I mumbled.

"Good. Then it was a real fight." He put the bread and cheese back in the cupboard. I swept up the crumbs. "There's milk in a pitcher in the stream," he said, "and sometimes beer, when they remember. Well water's in the courtyard—it's a bit of a haul, so I keep a bucket by the door. Don't drink from the stream; the cows step in it. It's all right for washing. You can go off exploring now if you'd like; you must be cramped from the ride. Just don't go in the field with the bull. Oh, and I'd stay clear of the village; I don't think they're ready for you."

I concluded regretfully that he was right, which was a shame, since they could probably tell me all about him. But I knew our own villagers. They would not warmly receive a girl dressed as a tumbler, and I bet the Highcombe folk wouldn't either. So I followed the stream into the woods instead, and found a little waterfall and a blackberry thicket with plenty of berries left, and an empty bird's nest floating in the water.

I came back as the shadows were long across the fields, my favorite time of day. The man was standing in front of the cottage, wearing nothing but a shirt over his breeches, sword in hand. I waved, but he didn't wave back; instead he turned and did something like a dance that wasn't, because the sword was flashing about in a determined manner, and when he stopped, you had the impression that he had won. I took a deep breath and went forward.

"Are you ready?" the swordsman asked.

"Wait—" I fumbled, and wrestled my sword out of its sheath. I was on guard, and so was he. And then things were happening very fast. He'd move, and I'd find his blade within my guard, and I'd think of the parry I should have made if only I'd seen him coming in time, but by then he'd struck again somewhere else. After a bit of this, at least I was ready to do *something* when he moved, even if half the time it was something that left me poking into thin air while he came at me again. Of course I never came anywhere within his guard; I only had to think about it for him to be right where I wanted to attack. As if he were weaving a fence around himself with his steel.

At last he stepped back and put up his blade, and I saw it just in time to keep from making a fool of myself by trying to skewer him.

"I take it," he said, "you've never killed anyone."

"Oh, dear no!"

"Just checking." He turned and went in the house. He wasn't even panting. I went and washed my face in the stream. And then went in to supper, which was vegetables boiling on the hearth. And bread and cheese.

But on the plain wooden table were a pair of candlesticks, silver dragons supporting the candles with their mouths. At each of our places was a wineglass flecked with gold, whose stem was a twisting dolphin.

"How beautiful!" The words escaped me. He held his glass by the stem, stroking the fragile curves familiarly. I could almost feel the cool, smooth glass just by watching him.

The vegetables needed seasoning, but I was hungry enough not to care. When I finished eating, suddenly I was so tired I could have put my head right in my empty plate.

"Sleep upstairs," he said. "I'll help you carry your things."

I wrestled myself and my gear gingerly up the narrow stairs, holding the candle.

"Don't worry," he said. "There's a pot under the bed; you don't have to risk breaking your neck in the dark."

I grinned, then considered that since there seemed to be no house servants I'd have to empty the thing myself. Not down the ladder-stairs, please! Maybe out the window. There were two: a large one with shutters, and a little round one over the bed. It glowed red with sunset, like stained glass.

He reached out and shuttered the window. As with everything else he did, his movements were economical and practiced. Suddenly my heart started to beat very hard. This was his bedroom. Did he know I was not a boy? He did know, didn't he? I could sleep in my clothes. I had a knife, but I'd better not try it. I remembered his hands on my belt, his breath in my hair, the sharp tip of his blade dancing around me. Maybe it would be all right. He was so quiet.

"Take the belt off," he said, "sword and dagger all at once, and try not to drop them. Hang the whole thing on that hook, then you can put it right on in the morning."

With cold fingers I complied. Of course I dropped the whole kit on the floor: the sword pulled one way, the dagger another, slipping along the belt. It was hopeless.

"Never mind." He smiled. "Good night."

He was on the stairs before I had the wit or the breath to object politely, "But where will you sleep?"

"I've got a pallet by the fire. It's fine. I get up during the night; this way I won't disturb you."

I heard an owl cry once, and then I was asleep.

DRESSING THE NEXT MORNING, I FOUND A TINY RIP IN the sleeve of my jacket, as if it had caught on something sharp like a nail. Betty hadn't packed me any needle and thread; it was my turn to mutter, "Oh, dear." The swordsman apologized. "That was me, I'm afraid." He seemed annoyed. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to touch you at all."

He had caught my jacket once in the entire bout with naked blades. I didn't think Master Venturus could do that well. Maybe he could. Fabian certainly could; he could even put out a candle flame. Maybe everyone could but me, even those showmen dueling at the duke's party.

"Let's go find some practice weapons," the man suggested. "I don't want to tip my good steel, and you're bound to knock it about some at first."

That was when I found out there was another door to the house. It was next to the hearth, and I hadn't even noticed: a piece of the wall with a handle and hinges. We passed from the modest cottage into the marble grandeur of the great house at Highcombe, like moving from one dream to another. A great hall with ceilings twice as high as the entire cottage. Useless, decorative space, and everywhere there was furniture shrouded in sheets, tall windows shuttered.

"Does he come here ever?" I wondered aloud.

"Oh, sometimes. He doesn't like the country much."

We found the old armory, full of antique weapons and country things like boar spears. My teacher picked us out some old, blunt practice swords, and we started back through the hall.

Suddenly, he grinned at me. "Hey!" he cried. "On your guard!"

I raised my sword, and he retreated before me. "Don't worry," he called, "I'll keep falling back—just come on!"

And so I advanced on him, all the way down the long gallery, driving the master swordsman back with my clumsy tipped blade, sweeping past the

portraits and landscapes, the swathes of sheeting, the covered mirrors, over the polished parquet.

He fetched up against a door, his face bright with laughter, and spread his arms open to me. I sighted my spot, to the left of his breastbone, and lunged —but he deflected the point with the tiniest of motions and my sword jarred in my hand.

"You want to relax your grip," he said, "but that was good: a nice, clean attack." He was laughing, looking back down the length of the hall. "God, I've wanted to do that ever since I got here! Thank you."

As the doorlatch behind him clicked, he spun, weapon raised. The woman coming through the doorway screamed and dropped her tray. He jumped back, and I chased after the rolling silver goblets while he said, "I'm so sorry," and she gasped, "Oh, sir! Oh, sir!"

It was awkward having no apron to collect them in. Boys don't need aprons, do they?

"This is my new student," he said, and to me, "Marita is the housekeeper." I was grateful to him for not revealing me as the duke's niece; it would have been all over the countryside by nightfall. As it was, she just looked hard at me, registered my sex and decided not to do anything about it. Then she took her silver and curtseyed. "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," she said, for all the world as though he were some nobleman, and not the tenant of a tacked-on two-room cottage. "Is everything in order?"

"Yes—no, wait, we need, what was it? Needle and thread."

She curtseyed again.

I suppose being able to kill people was enough to make them very polite to you, but I couldn't help wondering. "Are you a lord?" I asked when she was gone.

"Me?" His smile flashed white. "Hardly."

And that was all. He dressed very plainly, he wore no rings. He did not speak like a countryman. But neither did he sound educated, and there were no books where he lived. Nothing but swords, and precious things.

"I expect you have killed a great many people," I said at dinner in my best grown-up conversation voice.

"Yes, I have."

"Is it hard?"

He looked out past me. His eyes were unusual: blue, almost violet, like the heart of a candleflame. "Killing them instantly is hard. You want a blow to the heart, which is tricky, or through the windpipe, or through the eye to the brain, but people don't like to see that." I began to be sorry I asked. I put down my food. "Disabling them is easiest; they may die later, from infection or loss of blood. It's less satisfying. But it takes a lot of force to kill with one blow. You'd be surprised. I'm not sure you've got the strength yet. Even to pierce a lung…I could give you some exercises. Did you mean dueling, or street fighting?"

"Neither," I whispered. "I don't want to kill anyone."

"Then put your sword away," he said mildly, "or you will be killed." I shot a look up at him, but he merely looked interested.

"I don't want it," I blurted. "I never wanted any of this!"

"Really?" He considered me with his head tilted. "Then what do you want?"

I thought of gowns and balls, and of sewing and housekeeping, and of swordsmen and towers…Nowhere could I see myself. "Nothing! I wish I was dead!"

He did not mean to laugh, but I could hear the stifled breath. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen. And a bit."

"Hmm. When I was sixteen I left home and went to the city. I didn't know what I wanted, either. But things kept happening to me. It was interesting, and I found I could manage."

"That's different. You're a man. And you could fight."

"So you're a woman. And you will be able to fight. Are you sure you wouldn't like to reconsider?"

"Reconsider what?" I said rudely, deep in my own misery. "It's not as though I have a choice."

"Well," he said, "I suppose that's true. Do you have any idea why he's doing this?"

"None," I said. "Because of my father. He hates us."

"I think he hated his own parents more. I think he thinks that if your mother had known how to fight, they couldn't have forced her to marry if she didn't want to."

I stared at the man across from me. "Did he tell you that?"

"No. I figured it out."

"They didn't force her. She wanted to get married. No one's going to want to marry me."

"So what? You can have lovers."

I nearly yelped with shock. What did he think I was? "I'll clean up," I said instead.

Before going to bed, I opened his sword chest. The weapons were so finely crafted, they looked like settings for jewels. I touched the tip of one, gently, so that it did not break the skin. The oil from my finger's tip would be enough to darken and corrode the steel. I pictured the shining metal covered with blood. Keeping cloth between my hands and the blade, I examined the dragon's head sword. Near the hilt, a fleck of red. I rubbed at it. Rust. I should clean it, or tell him it was still there. Carefully, I wiped away the bit that I had touched.

HE WAS GONE WHEN I GOT UP THE NEXT MORNING. He'd left plates and crumbs on the table and walked away. I helped myself to breakfast, then began to rearrange things—not on purpose, but piece by piece, as I got ideas on where they would look nice. I set the dolphin glasses to catch the sun, made the jam and oil and honey pots line up in order of size and even angled the benches so we'd each have more room to sit. I did it all wearing my sword, too. Nothing had been moved in a long time; there were marks everywhere on floor and shelf, and so I swept and dusted as well. When I finished, it looked quite nice: a tidy room, glowing in the autumn sun.

I was drinking cold tea when the swordsman came in. His face was bright, his cloak thrown back, as if he'd been for a good long walk.

"Hello," I said politely. "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes." He smiled. He didn't say anything about the room. He walked forward and smashed into the bench, landing hard on the table, and sent my cup flying. I shouted, "Are you all right?"

"Yes." The swordsman got up slowly. "I just didn't see it. Have you moved things?" I'm afraid all I could do was stand and gape. "Because it would be better if you didn't."

He could see, I knew he could! I remembered the way he'd shown me around, the sure way he cut the bread and dished things up…My skin

crawled when I thought of our duel with the bare-tipped swords, and his annoyance at having grazed my sleeve just once.

"I'm sorry," I managed to whisper. "I won't anymore."

He brushed himself off, found the bench and righted it and walked around the table, touching it, seeming to see it with the edges of his eyes.

I glanced over at the glasses, the pots.

"Shall I show you the rest?"

"No, I'll find them. I just wasn't expecting it."

"I'm sorry. I could move things back—"

"No, I'll take care of it."

I had to know, and was afraid to ask. I watched him touch things and look at them. He never held them up in front of his face, but somewhere to the side, or even above. Sometimes he'd find them and touch them first, and never seem to see them at all. It was as if his hands and his eyes were not connected: one knew the world one way, the other another one, and to make them speak to each other was an act of deliberation.

"Lady Katherine." He did not like being watched. "You might take this time to practice. We will duel this afternoon."

I should have been quiet, obeyed the dismissal in his voice, been a good child, kept the unspoken agreement between us that neither would ask anything uninvited, or come too close. But I was frightened now. Nothing was as I'd thought. I had power over him, to move things and make him crash into them, to hurt him by shifting a bench, and he had power over my every breath and I didn't even know who he was—

"Are you blind?" I demanded.

"Almost."

"But then how…?"

"Hold your hands up in front of your eyes. No, a little further than that. Now, can you see?"

"Yes—No—I can see around them, but not…"

"That's exactly it. It takes some getting used to."

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing. It just came on me."

"Were you a swordsman?"

"I am a swordsman if I am anything."

"But if you can't see—"

"I can see what I have to."

"Did you work for the duke? Were you his swordsman?"

Surprisingly, the man smiled. "I suppose you could say I was his. And I certainly am working for him now: I've never been anyone's tutor before. It will be interesting to see what you can learn."

This time, I took his unspoken direction. "I'd better go practice, then."

Outside, I closed my eyes and hurled myself against the weight of the sword, the quickness of my own breathing, the slowness of my feet, the brightness of the day.

chapter II

As the Duke Tremontaine had predicted, there was chaos in the Council of Lords, and some of it could be laid at his door. The apportioning of new land taxes had been all but decided upon, and penalties for noncompliance laid out strictly but fairly. The unfortunate lack of rain in the south did not excuse a poor harvest; the nobles whose lands were the country's breadbasket would just have to extend themselves in some other way—lumber, perhaps. It was unfair that the northern nobles were expected to provide more than their share of wood for shipbuilding, at a time when trade was so profitable and the river so low that in places you could barely bring the northern lumber down at all. But foreign grain was cheap this year, and shipping lucrative. And if the river was impassable, roads could be widened and improved—roads that happened to pass through the lands of the ambitious Philibert, Lord Davenant, and his political affiliates. They were

powerful men; they served their country well, as had their fathers before them. What harm in a little profit for their faithful service, when the benefit to all was so clear to any but the most pig-headed of councilors?

But when copies of a certain document—a private agreement between Davenant and a foreign shipper, misleadingly worded so as possibly to be mistaken for a treaty between two countries—began to circulate, it threw the motives of all his associates, these noble councilors, into question. The original of the document was never found, of course, and no one could ascertain where the copies had come from; but it was enough to throw the coalition into disorder, their opponents into a rash of aggressive realignments and their tax proposals into brightly fluttering shreds. If that wasn't enough, that same Lord Davenant was suddenly burdened with a faithless actress mistress, an angry well-placed wife and a chief lieutenant who'd acquired one and, some said, the other, as well.

While no one could say exactly how or why, many of the coalition thought their troubles stemmed once again from indiscretions on the part of the Mad Duke, who always seemed to know more about the city than anyone could remember having told him. Nor did he scruple to disseminate his knowledge where a true gentleman would have kept his mouth shut. There was no use challenging him again; his swordsmen were as likely to win as not. The sword loved Alec Campion, it seemed, and always had.

The Crescent Chancellor, leader of the Council of Lords and head of the Inner Council, decided to go and speak to the Duke Tremontaine. Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris, had not visited the Riverside district in many years—not since his days as Dragon Chancellor, when the future duke had been a callow and obnoxious boy known only as Alec, and Deverin, already Lord Ferris, a rising star. Diane, Duchess Tremontaine, had taken Ferris under her wing and tutored him in statecraft. When he tried to outsmart her in that shadowy arena, she smoothly engineered his downfall, sending her young kinsman to Council to do the deed. Everyone knew, after all, that the beautiful duchess never meddled in politics.

His punishment, an ambassadorship to the icy and barbaric lands of Arkenvelt, wasn't a death sentence, though, and Ferris liked to think Diane had retained enough feeling for him to send him where he might succeed if he had the nerve and the brains, not to mention the endurance. The rewards of frozen Arkenvelt did include access to some of the world's finest

fur trading, and when his exile was over Ferris returned home with enough wealth in his pockets to reestablish himself in style. He frequented the right gatherings, married the right woman with the right connections, who died leaving him a small country estate and a good house in the city. He resumed his family seat on the Council of Lords, and there combined sense with statecraft in such perfect accord that, a mere ten years after his return, he was elected head of that august body of noblemen. It was in that capacity, now, that he paid a visit to Diane's heir and successor, whom he disliked as much as ever.

At the time of his last visit to the little island between the river's banks, Riverside had been no one's domain: a warren of criminals and swordsmen living in abandoned houses. But the Mad Duke in his fancy now occupied it, in more ways than one. Ferris was aware that once he crossed the Bridge, he trod the duke's territory. The City Watch still gave wide berth to the unsavory district, but it was honeycombed with Tremontaine's people. So the Crescent Chancellor traveled in semi-state, with both guards and swordsmen, that no one there might mistake his person.

Lord Ferris had never been invited to Tremontaine's Riverside house, and knew he was not welcome. Nevertheless his horses were stabled, his escort refreshed with courteous efficiency, and he was ushered into the ducal presence in very little time. It was not a house he himself would have chosen to live in: old-fashioned small rooms, dark paneling, heavy curtains…nothing shocking, though. Ferris felt almost disappointed. If there were indeed the pornographic frescos, instruments of torture, naked serving girls and other items popular opinion had decorated the duke's house with, they were not on public view.

The duke himself was sitting in an upholstered chair eating crackers and cheese and slices of apple. He was wearing a brocade robe, and possibly not much else. His hair was tousled, imperfectly caught back in a black velvet ribbon.

He bit a cracker and shrugged. "Sorry. I get hungry."

Lord Ferris refused the offer of any refreshment. If he'd roused the duke from carnal pleasures so be it, but he would be heard. "Tremontaine," he said, "I'll not take much of your time. I come from the Council on my own initiative, to ask you to reconsider your stand on the new tax laws."

"Stand? I have no stand."

"Of course not," Lord Ferris said with mild irony. "You never do. Like your grandmother, the late duchess, you have no interest in politics."

The duke smiled. "Exactly like." One of the late duchess's secret protégés, Lord Ferris knew the worth of that statement better than most. "It's a family tradition."

"And it is by pure accident that you have managed to bring down a coalition that was months a-building to make some honest change—"

"Honest change? Honest? Has someone altered the definition of the word while my back was turned, or have you recently developed a sense of humor?"

Lord Ferris pressed his lips together tightly. He endured these little sallies in the open Council Hall, as His Lordship of Tremontaine sporadically descended upon their proceedings. But there was no audience here to snicker appreciatively.

"Oh, Campion," Ferris sighed. "Your grandmother was no friend to chaos. I wonder what she was thinking of when she made you her heir."

"Perhaps," the duke said around a mouthful of apple, "she thought I would reform."

Ferris flashed him a look. In these, his later years, he had even less patience with people pretending to be stupid. But he only said, "I do not think it."

"Nor do I," the younger man said frankly. "Perhaps she did not care what happened to the state, once she was dead. Maybe she wanted to bring it down after her."

From a low, polished table, Ferris bent to pick up one of the little glass birds she had collected. He held it gently. "Oh, no, not she."

"Or she thought you and Godwin and all her other fancy boys would rise to the occasion. As indeed you do. She trained you well. The Council bears her stamp, I bear her title and everyone is happy."

Carefully, Ferris put the bird down. "There is something else I thought…" his drawl had become almost as long as the duke's, a relic of both their youths "…when I heard you had inherited after all. I wondered if she had not intended all along for your exquisite swordsman, St Vier, to direct the duchy. One so admired his balance. And you did seem inseparable, back then." He looked lazily at a spot over the duke's head. "Yet you did separate. Perhaps that was the flaw in her reasoning."

The duke scrutinized his pearl-handled fruit knife as though he had forgotten just what it was for. Finally, he applied it carefully to the skin of his apple.

"It is interesting how one idolizes the departed," the duke mused. "You admire the late duchess now, but I remember you calling her some very ugly names when she had you exiled to Arkenvelt over the matter of your misuse of my exquisite swordsman. I did think then, my lord, that you had learned that St Vier cannot be used against Tremontaine."

Ferris heard the message and noted it for further study. He had been wondering if the swordsman was still alive. It appeared he might be. *Alive, but not in play*. He chose to ignore the dig at his own past disgrace; it was, after all, Tremontaine who had brought him to the political exile he had spent years and a small fortune to return from, and there was no reason for either of them to have forgotten it. "I remember," the Crescent Chancellor added, "how very much in demand he was in his heyday, your swordsman. He killed with one blow to the heart."

"If he liked you. As you may also remember, he was not always so merciful." The duke gathered the folds of his poisonous green-and-black robe around him. "And now, if you will excuse me, there's someone waiting for me."

Lord Ferris did not bow, but said tightly, "We must all excuse you. Constantly. I trust we will see you no more this season in Council?"

The duke cocked his head. "Now, why should you think that?"

Lord Ferris opened his mouth to make a double-edged rejoinder, and closed it again, suddenly sick of the whole thing, and not at all sure of keeping his temper—another provocation he very much resented from the duke. "You disappoint me," Ferris said heavily. "You could be more, much more."

"I don't think the city would take much more of me."

"It would if you put your position to good use!" This was the speech Ferris had come planning to make, but it came pouring out of him untempered. "You have opinions, everyone knows you do; why will you not come and debate them in open Council with the rest of us? Statecraft and policy take time. They take patience and forethought and, yes, even compromise. They are not toys—we are not toys—to be picked up and put down at your whim, because you cannot stay the long course that it would take to effect real

change. You are not stupid, you must surely know that. You find no one worthy of your vision, you do not wish to be a reliable ally? Fine. But at least be a reliable opponent, instead of shifting like a weathercock, blown by the wind of your fancy."

The duke paused and looked at him with real surprise. "Ferris," he said, "I am not a boy any longer. I don't particularly care if I disappoint you or not. Save your pompous sermonizing for the young fools who want to impress you and run the country into the ground with self-serving tax schemes."

Many years ago, Lord Ferris had lost his left eye. He turned the patch to the duke, a black velvet gaze that often unnerved people. "Someday," he said, "you will regret the loss of that swordsman."

Which was not at all what he had intended to say. Before his temper could drive him to further indiscretion, Lord Ferris turned and left the room. His own swordsmen and guards stood ranked to escort him; and in the shadows of the corridors of the Riverside house, he fancied he saw the shapes of others, watching.

THE DUKE TREMONTAINE THREW HIS FRUIT KNIFE AT the wall, where its point stuck, quivering, due to luck or the fury of the blow.

Then he went into the adjoining room, where the Ugly Girl was sitting on his bed reading, fully dressed.

"God, you're a pig when you wake up," she observed.

"He should not have come so early."

"Early!" she snorted. "It's after noon. Though you'd never know it; in your room, it is eternal twilight." She reached for one of the red velvet curtains, but he barked, "Stop. I like it this way."

"Come down to the library," she suggested, "where there's plenty of light, and quit hoarding books in your room. What else have you got in that pile?"

"Poetry," he said sweetly. "And pornography. Nothing to please your maiden eyes."

"Crap. You've got Merle's *Antithesis*, and after you swore you'd let me read it first."

"I will let you read it first. I was saving it to give to you on a special occasion."

"Like when you've been really annoying?"

"Just so. Where else are you going to get a copy of a banned book?"

She extended herself across the bed and snatched it from the pile. "For a noble and a libertine, you're not so bad. Want to go downstairs and work on Coverley's Last Theorem?"

"No," he drawled; "I want to stay here and smoke something."

The fat woman shrugged. "Suit yourself. But when I solve it without you, don't expect any credit for helping."

"I am going to have visions."

"Some people," she said, "have no idea how to enjoy themselves."

But the duke opened a cabinet by his bed, and began sorting through his collection of little vials. "*You're* all right," he said to the door closing behind her. "Without poetry or pornography, it's unlikely that anyone will ever strike you through the heart."

Soon he began to feel better.

chapter III

I LEARNED THE SWORD FROM HIM, BUT I LEARNED more. I learned to be quiet in the wood, and how to breathe so no deer could hear me. I learned how to gut a fresh-caught fish, and how to rob a beehive of its honeycomb. I learned to know where my feet were at all times, and how to make the sword I wore a part of myself, so that when my teacher took a sudden swipe at me, my hand was no longer empty, and I was not defenseless.

I rediscovered skills I'd had as a child: climbing trees, knocking down nuts, skipping stones across a pond.

And I learned him well enough that it became harder for him to surprise me with a sudden attack. I could sense the stillness of his impending motion, and I was ready.

I raided the great house's kitchen gardens for herbs, and made a little plot by our door so that I would not have to go so far to make our food taste like something. As the harvest came in, the house staff left us baskets of good ripe squash and tomatoes and leeks and chard. I was going to miss the sweet green peas I ate by the handful that were already gone by. I dried bunches of thyme and sage, and brought indoors a little pot of rosemary I hoped would last out the winter.

There was always enough butter and cream and cheese, since there were more than enough cows. And suddenly, as the night air turned cold and the day sky burned a bright and gallant blue, the world was full of apples. The air smelt of them, sharp and crisp, then underlaid with the sweet rot of groundfall. One day the orchard was infested with children, filling their baskets with them for cider. The next week, pigs were rootling for what was left.

On one of the last warmish nights of autumn we sat by the stream, grilling trout stuffed with fennel over a fire of apple wood. The stars were thick as spilled salt above us.

He pulled his cloak around him and poked the fire with his staff. "There were apple trees where I grew up. I used to collect fallen wood for my mother. And steal the lord's apples, with his sons."

"Were you caught?"

"Chased, not caught. He was a nice man. He understood boys get hungry. He liked my mother; used to lend her books and things."

"Did your father die?"

"I never had one, not in the usual way of things. My mother ran away with him when she was young, but she decided she didn't like him after all. By then she was stuck with me, but I guess she didn't mind. She used to show me bat skeletons and teach me the names of plants."

My mother seemed so far away she hardly seemed worth mentioning. And mine never had any bat skeletons. "She sounds a bit…unusual."

"Yes, I figured that out later."

"Did she teach you to fight?"

"Oh, no. I learnt from a swordsman. No, she couldn't do anything practical, really."

We'd eaten all we wanted to eat, but were in no mood to leave the fire.

"It's too bad neither of us can sing," my teacher said. "The nights are getting longer. Can you recite anything?"

Poetry? I thought in panic. "Just schoolroom things: 'The Maid Forlorn,' 'The King's Run,' that sort of thing."

"Can I hear them?"

He was always amazing me by not knowing the most common things. "Well, if you like."

But he stopped me halfway through "The Maid Forlorn." "Do you think that could really happen?"

I sucked fish off my fingers. "A girl believing everything a man tells her? Probably. Some people are very gullible."

I heard him smile. "True. But—are you supposed to admire her as well as feel sorry for her? Or just to think, *I'll never do anything that stupid?*"

I'd never considered it. "You know," I said, "I think the point is she's in love with him, even though she isn't supposed to be. That's what makes her stupid, really. It's not to say she isn't clever with other things. She might have been very good at sums or geography or something, beforehand."

"So they made you learn this as a lesson not to fall in love with unsuitable men?"

I drew myself up. I did not like having my upbringing criticized, even by him. "I learnt this," I said, "because it is *poetry*. Girls are supposed to know poetry. It is the inner beauty of the soul made art."

"I take it she dies at the end."

"She wants to die. She's been betrayed. She's lost her *honor*." He made a dismissive noise. "Well, what do you want her to *do*?" I demanded. "Go off somewhere and open a *shop*?"

"Well, why not?"

"Because then it wouldn't be *poetry*."

"How's 'The King's Run'?"

"It's heroic. The young king dies, but it's for the land."

"I thought nobles hated the kings."

"We overthrew the bad ones," I explained, drawing on my schoolroom lessons of a lifetime ago. "There used to be better ones, before, in the really

olden days. Those are the poetry ones."

He leaned forward. "Look, I've been wondering about that. People have written books of history, haven't they? We might find a few in the library here."

"I could read to you."

"Yes, I'd like that."

I thought, and then said, "Your mother, she never taught you to read, did she?"

"It didn't seem important, then. You know how it is."

Well, I did know. Learning things was hard, and people were always trying to teach you things you didn't want to know. If I had a daughter, I'd never make her sew or cook if she didn't want to. But she'd have to learn to read and keep accounts. "History books?" I asked. I suspected they'd be dull. But maybe I'd find other books in the Highcombe library, good ones, like travel or adventure. "Could we send for more from the city?"

"I'll tell them, next time someone comes. Do you know how long you'll be staying?"

It was the first time he had asked.

"I don't know. I don't think anyone does. Maybe he has forgotten about me."

"I don't think so. He'll forget you for a few days, ignore you for a month, but he won't forget forever."

I had stopped thinking that the duke might send for me and drag me off to yet another life. I did not want to go.

I smothered the fire, while my master waited under the stars. He wouldn't let me touch him to guide him in, but walked straight over the field, his staff before him to intercept surprises.

In the dark, my teacher saw almost nothing. But he liked the night. He would go out for walks, and return at dawn to sleep. Sometimes I'd wake to hear him practicing, stomps and shuffles and whipcracks of steel, broken rhythms in the night. The first time it happened I crept, frightened, to the top of the stairs with a candle. My master was below, in the dark empty room. He was nearly naked, sweating, spinning and dodging with blade in hand, like someone battling a nightmare. My little flame flung his shadow wild against the wall.

If he heard me he did nothing, just kept on with the attack, high and low, behind and before. I watched him do things I did not know a swordsman could do. I began to see the design, the opponent's moves that his were counter to. I could never give him a fight like that. Neither, I was sure now, could the swordsmen I'd seen at the duke's party.

I knew when the death came, a blow straight through the heart. In the pale rays of my candleflame, finally he turned to look up to where I sat. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't thinking about you. I'll try to be more quiet when you're asleep."

"Can you see in the dark?"

"Not at all. But night sounds completely different."

He was quiet and I was quiet, listening. There was no birdsong, only the distant calls of hunting owls, and skitterings of small things in the brush. I almost felt I could hear the daytime creatures breathing their slow sleep in the night.

"May I practice with you?"

"I have the advantage."

"I know. But you do anyway. It would be interesting."

He wiped his chest with a towel. "Not tonight, I think. Another time, without a candle, yes."

And I did that, once the days grew so short there was no light left after supper; standing so still, in the shadowed dark, waiting for him to move out of shadow or for one of the shadows to become him. We practiced with sticks. I never felt him move until he struck. Over and over, until I wanted to cry. My every attack beat off by one of his.

"Listen," he'd say. "Be still."

I closed my eyes. I stood still until my arms and legs ached. Then I heard him move.

I cracked him right in the head, and then I had to be sorry and get a cold cloth to put on it.

"Next time," he grinned, "you'll find the target. Although…in a street fight you'd be fine."

"No one," I said, "stands like a block of ice in the middle of the street after dark."

"You'll be surprised, when you get to the city, just what people will do."

"Tell me about the city, then."

The master shrugged. “It’s crowded. It smells. There are lots of things to buy.”

I snorted. “I’ve been there,” I said. “I know all that.” But I didn’t know the city, not really. I’d only passed through in a carriage, and spent my days in the duke’s house on the Hill. “Did you like it?” I asked.

“It was interesting.” He always said that about things another person would have strong feelings about. I knew there was a long story in him about the city and that he was hiding it from me.

“I expect I will have a house there someday,” I said breezily. “Perhaps you will come visit.”

“No. I would not like to go there now.” But his calm, sure voice was quiet; he sounded as though perhaps he would.

I repented of my relentlessness. “Does your head hurt very much?”

“Not very much. Help me roll out the bedding.”

The master staggered as he bent over to pull the pallet out. I had to make him sit down. “Oof!” he said, as I spread his bed on the floor. “It wasn’t such a bad knock. It’s funny; I was always sure I’d never live to be twenty-five. This all comes as a surprise, this business of after.”

I had lit a candle, being unable to find things in the dark as he could. In the rich light he looked pale, fine-drawn, neither young nor old. I wanted to give him a strong dose of poppy and make him tell me things before he fell asleep.

I heated some wine on the hearth instead. Twenty-five seemed terrifically old to me. I couldn’t imagine the time it would take to get there, let alone get past it. When I was twenty-five, my whole life would be decided. I’d probably be married, with children; at least, I hoped so. Unless I was killed by a sword, the way he had planned to be.

I put the wine into his hands. He drank it all, but did not ask for more. He wasn’t going to tell me anything. I should have known.

chapter IV

It was only a light fever. Artemisia Fitz-Levi had managed to hide it from her family and was now on her way to the Halliday ball, dressed and decorated and dazzling. In the chill of the winter carriage, it was a positive benefit that she felt so hot. The Hallidays were important, their ball was always one of the best of the season, and she was not going to miss it.

When she emerged into the ballroom, her eyes glittering, her face flushed, heads turned to admire her. Young men asked her to dance, asked if they could fetch her a cooling drink. She laughed and flirted with her fan, feeling her head floating high above them all, knowing that she could keep going forever, since if she stopped or sat down for a moment she would collapse. She accepted the dances, accepted the drinks, accepted the compliments and the jealous or inquiring looks of the other nobles' daughters who were also there to attract a husband of worth.

Seeing that she needed no coaching, Artemisia's mother had already gone off to find the card tables, her father to find a convivial crew to drink with and observe the gathered beauties. Her particular friend, Lydia Godwin, was traversing the floor with the scion of the house of Lindley, and seemed to be enchanted by the boy. Artemisia looked around for the next arm to take, the next eye to catch. She was relieved not to see the Mad Duke's nephew, Greg Talbert, anywhere; he had turned out to be a bore after all, despite his ardent admiration and exotic connections. She knew better, now; weeks of experience had taught her that flowery phrases and passionate glances were a minnow a handful. Every man was full of them; it was what came next that mattered. Her eyes darted anxiously. If no one approached her again soon, she would have to make for the haven of Lydia, Lindley or no Lindley; it was beyond impossible for her to stand in the middle of the floor looking as if she had no one to talk to. She bent her head down, carefully adjusted a curl by

winding her dark tress around and around her jeweled finger. When she looked up, she was surprised to find her cousin Lucius bearing down on her.

"Cousin!" Lucius Perry kissed her cheek. "My friend Dav has begged for an introduction to the beauty of the evening."

She thought dear Lucius had had more than a little to drink; that accounted for the rose of his cheeks as well as the fulsomeness of his speech. But young Lord Petrus Davenant was a likely-looking man, with a jaunty eye and nice hair.

"Must all your friends beg you for favors, Lucius?" she teased. "You should be more generous!"

"You note," her cousin said to Lord Petrus, "she does not demur at being called a beauty!"

"That is because I know how free men are with their compliments, when they cost them nothing."

"Philosophy." She felt a strange shiver when the back of Davenant's hand swept her wrist as if by accident. She was wearing demi-sleeves, whose lace fell to just halfway down her forearm. The ruffles of his cuff had fallen back, exposing a broad hand tufted with wiry hair. "You did not tell me your cousin was one of those learned ladies, Perry."

"Oh, I assure you, my lord, I never pick up a book except to throw it at my maid!"

Lord Petrus said, "A learned man is merely a bore, a learned woman an abomination."

She tapped his sleeve with her fan. "You must not be cruel to learned ladies, for I fear they are so because they lack the power to charm and to delight."

"Only the fair are free to know nothing, then," observed Lucius Perry, and, bowing, "You will excuse me?"

His place was taken by Lord Terence Monteith, a man who managed to bore without being learned; but he seemed content to stare at her charms while Davenant attempted to delight her with his conversation.

The flashing jewels and fluttering fan, the rippling laughter and high-flung head were attracting other men. Artemisia Fitz-Levi found herself at the heart of a clutch of eligibles, saying anything that came into her head because it all elicited laughter and compliments from well-dressed, well-tended, well-jeweled men.

"The country!" she cried in response to Davenant's friend Galing. "Don't speak to me of the country! It is well enough for those who live to be milked two times a day!"

There was an edge to the laughter that surprised her; she must have said something really clever without realizing.

"I know some who do!" said Davenant.

"Well, don't we all?"

"What does any of us know, compared to the wit and wisdom of this most excellent lady?" a voice said warmly.

The young men's hilarity flattened out, and they turned like flowers in the sun in the direction of the speaker.

It was the older nobleman from the Godwin dinner who had so admired her spirit and told her so. Lord Ferris, the Crescent Chancellor of the Council of Lords, tall, commanding, still dark-haired despite his years, and dressed with elegant simplicity.

All the men were looking at Lord Ferris, but he was looking at her.

Artemisia felt her cheeks burning. She smiled brilliantly at him, tried to think of something to say that was clever and high-hearted, but her invulnerable feeling of a moment ago was suddenly gone. Her giddiness resolved into dizziness, and she reached out one arm. The crowd parted, and Ferris was miraculously at her side, giving her the support she needed.

"A breath of air, perhaps, my lady?"

"Oh, no—no, thank you. If I might just sit down for a moment…"

"Of course." He kept up a stream of easy chatter as he guided her off the floor, past people and through them, keeping her on his right side, where he might see her with his good eye: "These endless parties are exhausting—not any given one, to be sure, for all must be equally delightful, but in the aggregate they are enough to send anyone reeling."

"Oh, but I love parties!" Artemisia rallied.

"Because you are such an ornament to them," he said smoothly, "as the jewel must love its setting, or the, ah, the pearls in your ear must love the place that shows them off to such advantage."

His voice was low and silky in her ear. She wondered if he should be speaking to her so; but he was a great nobleman, and more than old enough to know how things should be conducted properly in society.

She tried to say something pertinent. "What can jewels know of love?"

"Indeed." Lord Ferris seated her in an alcove. "They are love's servants, and not the thing itself. A wise lady, to know the difference." He seized a drink from a passing footman and offered it to her. "So you do not love the country, Lady Artemisia?"

"I had rather live in this city than anywhere else on earth."

"Not everyone agrees with you. But I do. No, I cannot see you buried in the country, raising herbs and children, and waiting for your husband or your eldest son to come home from Council with bolts of cloth and news of how new taxes will affect the estate…"

She shuddered.

"Just so. You must adorn our ballrooms here for many years to come, I think."

Artemisia smiled. "Thank you, my lord."

She wanted to hear more, only her head was pounding so. He must have noticed something. "Will you permit me to fetch your shawl?" he asked, and she answered, "Oh, no, it is so very warm. I promised Lord Terence a dance, but I do not think that I could bear it now."

"You must be protected," the Crescent Chancellor said, "from such as Lord Terence, to be sure. Ah! Here is your mother. Lady Fitz-Levi is your surest bulwark. Madam, your daughter has given so much of her charm and beauty for the delight of the company, I fear she has little strength left to sustain herself."

"Curious," said her mother; "dear Artemisia is so seldom tired or weak. I assure you, my lord, she has never given us a moment's worry."

IN THE CARRIAGE, HER MOTHER HUGGED HER AND THEN shook her. "What do you mean, languishing in front of Lord Ferris like that? Do you want to get a reputation as a vaporish miss? No man wants a sickly wife!"

"No, Mama," she said, too tired and ill to try to explain how well the rest of the evening had gone. Her mother would surely hear of it from the other girls' mothers. "But he said I was a jewel and an ornament, Mama."

"He is a man of very good address," said Lady Fitz-Levi. "He married late, but Ferris has always had a way with women."

"I did not know that he was married, Mama."

"She died, poor thing, and his heir with her. Sickly, both of them. So you see where that gets you, miss!"

But her mama was pleased enough when the flowers began to arrive the next morning: lilies from Petrus Davenant, chrysanthemums from an anonymous admirer, more mums from Terence Monteith, even a bunch of carnations from her cousin Lucius. And from Lord Ferris, a great bunch of white roses.

chapter V

THE COLD ENCLOSED AND ENFOLDED US. DAYS WERE short; when they were fair the sun was sharp and clear, the earth hard and sparkly with frost, and I dressed in layers of clothes and set out across the fields, to race back again before early sunset stained the sky violet. I dredged up old nursery games and riddles to amuse us by the fire, and we burned a wealth of beeswax candles keeping up with our reading. Highcombe was well endowed with history books. Some of them weren't bad. I learned a lot about the habits and practices of my noble ancestors that no one had seen fit to teach me before. There was a lot more to history than dates: you had taxes and alliances and trade and secrets, and the wicked ways of certain kings. My teacher was particularly fascinated with battles. We spent hours and stacks of twigs, pebbles and candle-ends setting up and replaying the Battle of Pommerey. I was more interested in travel, though, and so we also learned about the wonders and marvels of foreign lands.

"It's never cold in Chartil," I suggested, "even in the winter, and all the noblemen are swordsmen, too. Let's go there."

"It would be summer by the time we got there," he said. "I understand, their summers, you can cook an egg on a rooftop."

"Well, how about one of the Cycladian Islands? Here's one, Kyros: 'the climate temperate, and so too its handsome inhabitants, who take their industry and pleasant mien from the humming of the bees that do perpetually labor and sing in the great banks of thyme and olive orchards to make that honey which is renowned throughout the world, as its sands are for whiteness.'"

"Promising. But it sounds a bit like poetry; not reliable. How about the place with the two-headed beasts that uproot trees with their tusks?"

"And red flowers big as cottages? You think that's reliable?"

"There's only one way to find out."

But we didn't really want to go far from the fire.

We practiced, of course. I practiced my footwork up and down the house's long gallery, but my favorite drill was a kind of game where we'd sit at either end of the cottage hearth, using nothing but our arms, working out flashy and subtle wristwork. There was a pile of nuts in the middle. Every touch was one nut to the victor, and every flinch, start or attempt to use the legs was a forfeit of two. I was lucky if I had any by the end of a bout. He could sometimes be tricked into moving too soon; I kept the first one I ever won off of him by feinting.

The tiny staff that kept Highcombe in order for its owner kept us well supplied with food and comforts. But if before I had secretly envied the grandeur of its halls and chambers, wishing we might occupy them ourselves, now I was reluctant to venture into those icy caverns.

As the winter dragged on, night and day alike seemed grey and steely and unwelcoming. I missed the snow we had back home. Around Highcombe it never got deep enough to be much fun.

I couldn't stay indoors all the time, though. And I liked looking at the patterns the bare branches made against the sky, the cracks of ice on the path, the dried grass frozen in the field. Sometimes just before nightfall the sky would clear. There was that one night I caught the most glorious sunset at the top of the rise, and ran all the way back to the cottage against the

shadows. The smoke from our chimney was heavy. When I came indoors, I found him sitting by a fire going so strong that the room was really hot.

The master's face was golden. "Put more logs on," he said; "really pile them high. It's Year's End tonight."

"Is it?" I thought of the famous city Last Night parties I would be missing. The notion of all that glitter and noise made my head ache. Sparks shot up as I dumped the new logs on the blaze. "I should have baked a cake, or something."

"No; I think a fire is just right to celebrate the Sun's return. When I was a boy, we built bonfires and threw all sorts of things on them."

"Oh! They did that down in our village, but we were never allowed to go." I pitched another log on in remembrance. It was so hot, we had to move away from the hearth, and I stripped down to jacket and shirt. "We had a big fire at home, and threw our naughtiness and regrets onto it."

The master smiled into his past. "Yes, bonfires, and people got very drunk and danced; that's probably why you weren't allowed."

I watched and let the flames dance for me. Year's End, and another year begun. In spring, I would dig out some beds. Maybe when the roads cleared, I would ride out to see my mother, and get some seeds from home. We could have little baby carrots in July.

"Listen!"

Carriage wheels rumbled on the drive. I grasped the leg of his chair without meaning to. Oh, please, I thought, oh please don't let it be anyone coming here. Please don't let them find us. The carriage swept on up the drive toward the main house. We both sat very still, listening.

"Maybe it's someone come to pay a Last Night call on the duke," I offered.

"They'd know he's not in residence."

"Maybe—maybe he told them he would be."

The master smiled, slowly, to himself. He knew my uncle. "Maybe he did."

Over the crackle of the fire we heard shouts and whoops of laughter, then doors slamming, and then nothing at all.

"In the main house."

"What if it's thieves?" I gasped.

"I doubt it, making that racket. Still…" He took up his sword. But nothing happened. No more sounds from the house.

"Should we go look?" I said.

He said, “Just wait.”

My teacher slipped his jacket off, and sat with his sword in his shirtsleeves before the blazing hearth.

Next to the hearth, the doorlatch clicked. It was someone from the house who had a key. The swordsman’s hand tightened on the hilt; then I saw him sit back.

“Hello,” said the man in the doorway. “I’ve brought us some fish.” He had a large basket on either arm. “And some very good wine, and cakes, and smoked goose, and candied fruit and anise wafers. I hope you’re hungry. I am.”

“Hello.” The master was smiling at my uncle as though the sun had risen early. “Come in. Sit down. Have something to eat.”

My uncle the Mad Duke edged his way in, cumbered with baskets and parcels. He dumped everything onto the table. His eyes were on the master; but he never came near him, as though the man were a fire that burned too hot for him to approach.

I couldn’t believe it. Of all the people who had to come here on this night of all nights, why did it have to be him? Why didn’t he warn us he was coming? Why didn’t he ask me how I was? I’d almost rather it were burglars after all. I busied myself unwrapping things, opening jars and unfolding layers of paper. The duke said nothing ’til I took out my knife to cut a knotted string.

“Here,” he said, “I’ve brought you something.”

He reached into his coat, produced a slender bundle. “Happy New Year. A little early.”

Oh, no. Should I have been stitching him some slippers or something? I hadn’t made anything for anyone, hadn’t even thought about them. Well, it was too late now. I unwrapped the duke’s present.

It was a dagger in a glorious sheath of chased leather. The grip was twisted to look like vines, and the blade, when I pulled it, was bright and damascened, chased with a pattern of leaves.

“She likes it,” the duke said to my master.

“She does.”

“What have you been teaching her, then; useful things?”

“Very. She’ll do all right.”

The duke and my teacher seemed to know one another so well, they could leave half the words out and still have perfect understanding. I had to pretend not to hear them. Everything they said was for each other. I busied myself with putting the new knife on my belt. They were talking about me, though; that was something. I rather hoped the master would praise my progress at swordplay, but he did not, or not that I could hear.

The duke shook out his long hair, and cast aside scarves and overcoat. "It's hot in here. Good. It was cold on the road."

"A sudden whim?"

"Just so. My friends were bored, and decided they wanted a country party."

"Friends? What friends?"

"Oh, Davenant, Hetley, young Galing…They've taken to following me around. Their lives are so dull. I said I was coming here for Year's End, and they insisted on coming too. I don't know; I think they must have been drunk or something."

"Oh, Alec." The swordsman sounded very amused. "What have you done now?"

"Well, they *would* come. But I seem to have lost them."

"Lost them?"

"Somewhere in the Great Hall. It was so dark in there."

"You left them in the hall. In the dark. My dear, did you forget to tell them that the staff always goes home for the White Days? Or did you just forget?"

"Is that why it was so cold?" My teacher made a noise. "Oh, well, they'll find wood. And somewhere to sleep—God knows there's plenty of rooms in this pile."

He really *was* mad, I thought. But my teacher was laughing.

"Here." The duke had gotten a bottle of wine open. He found the dolphin glasses, and a cup for me. "Don't drink too much; wait 'til it warms up a bit, it tastes better." But already Tremontaine's wine exhaled the tang of summer raspberries, and the savor of sun on apple wood.

He busied himself with plates and spoons like any footman. "Cherries? No, you don't like them—good, more for me—try the cheese, it's got something odd in it; oh damn, the fish is squashed, but here, have a bite…"

I had forgotten food could taste this good, with layers of flavor and texture. The lovely wine washed it all down with waves of richness, and then there was sweet wine for the wafers and the fruit and the cakes, which were not squashed but retained the shapes of flowers, with sugar leaves and marzipan bees and another wine for them, as well.

"And how is your honey?" I heard the duke ask.

"If you think I can eat any honey after all this—"

"No, no, I was just being polite. About your bees."

"I'll tell them you asked after them, next time I see them."

That thought of the master conveying the duke's compliments to his bees made me giggle, which made me cough, so I drank more wine. I don't always like wine, but this was wonderful stuff, what the duke gave me.

"Let's see, you've got your bees, and what—do you garden now? Or fish?"

"Oh, now, fishing…where's the challenge in that?"

I let out a whoop at the picture: the master would be holding the one sword, and a bright gold fish the other, and they'd bow to each other and then they'd…I thought I would never stop laughing. It would be better to go outside and get a breath of fresh air, but the only door I could find was right next to the fire, and that was no good. The other side of that door was grey and cold, nowhere to travel on such a night.

The hearth was heaped with red and golden coals, now, like a pile of roses. I wondered what it would be like to lie down in it. What kind of creature would I have to be, to lie in the fire and not feel it? I began to see little beings, flickering white hot in the spaces between embers. They winked and danced and sometimes seemed to sing. I watched them for a long time, as the fire grew darker and they slept, or departed for hotter fires.

The men were talking, ignoring me; they didn't see what I saw. Stories that burned themselves into my eyes, that faded away as the fire died and the year ended. I turned to tell them, and found that the room was spinning.

The room was spinning. I lay down on the master's pallet, because I was too dizzy to make it all the way up the stairs. It was very quiet, lying down, and dark. I must have slept; then voices began weaving their way into my dreams, words that were about to have meanings, but then they changed before I could follow them. Voices I knew, but sounding all wrong. I knew where I was, safe at Highcombe, but it didn't make any sense because my uncle the Mad Duke was here.

"What about *her*?" I dreamed them saying it.

"She's asleep."

I opened my eyes to show I was not asleep, but all I could see was red fire; I was still in the heart of the fire.

"Why did you come?"

"Do you wish I hadn't?"

"No, of course not."

"Come to me," my mad uncle purred.

"Like this?"

"No. In the dark." The hiss of silk. The fire went black. "Perfectly in the dark. Come to me now…"

Silence. Long silence, and I was asleep again, only someone was being hurt, I heard them crying out; I struggled, but I could not free myself from the blankets to help them.

Then the crash of a log falling, and a whisper: "I love you."

"Liar! If you did, then you'd come back."

The swordsman's voice was low but clear, the voice I knew from hours of practice: "You know I would if I could."

"You can. You *must*!"

"I can't, Alec. Not like this."

"It wouldn't matter. I could make it not matter—"

"No, you could not. Not even you, my lord."

If I had had a sword, I could have stopped the voices, and the noise; but I had left it outside in the snow, the blade was turning to diamonds.

"You only stay here to feel sorry for yourself."

"Is that so?"

A muffled sound, then, "Don't, you're hurting me."

"I know." The swordsman, cool and detached. "If I kept on, I could kill you."

"But you'd miss me then."

"I miss you now. You aren't happy, you know."

"I would be, if you were there."

"No."

"Your pride, that's all that's holding you, just pride—"

"If you like."

"But I can undo that with my hands alone…"

"Your hands. Your voice. You can, my lord. You do." A hissing of fire. "But only because there is something left of me to be undone. Be sensible, Alec. Just for a moment. What is there for me to do there, now, in the city?"

"What do you do here?"

"Here. Here…before you sent me this little diversion…I walk. I practice. It's quiet. Trees. Nobody bothers me."

"It's the people, then."

"Why do you stay there yourself? They only make you crazy. I saw what it was doing to you."

"I hate the country."

"Because you can't shock it. Or annoy it. Oh, Alec…" he sighed.

"What?"

"I don't know. I love you."

"I do not think so. Do you even think of me, when I am not right here pressed against you?"

"I think of you. I try not to."

"And is that difficult? Or is it easy here, not to think of me?" A hiss of breath, a cry of pain. "Is that what the country is for? So you can forget me? I give you a house to live in and safety, all so you can never think of me? Well, I think of you. I think of you a lot. Almost always, in fact. Do you know what my days are really like, Richard? My days, and my nights. Shall I tell you?"

"Shh, I know. Don't you think I know? I can feel it, feel it all over you. There, and there, and there—They are making you one of them after all. All that excess to no purpose."

"Shut up. You're never there, what do you know?"

"I know you. Be still, Alec, don't…"

"You've done this to me. I wish I could kill you, but I'm already dead. I'm dead, and everyone else is a ghost. I sleep with everyone I can find—I plunge myself into flesh like buckets of cream, and I am always starving. My mouth is open, but nothing gets in. You are the only one that's real. How do you do that, Richard? If you killed me, would I be real, too?"

"If I really killed you, you would be really dead. Please don't start that."

"Ah," said the duke coldly. "*Please*. Yes. Let's have you do some pleading for once. Because I'm tired of it. I'm sick of begging. I am not supposed to beg, certainly not to beg you. Do you know who I am? Sometimes I wonder if you understand how different things are now. I am not a ragged student who

needs to be protected from tavern bullies. I am Tremontaine. I hold the power, the lands, the money. I hold Riverside, for one, and more of the city. I hold them, and I would burn them to the ground for you, Richard, I would kill them all and leave nothing—"

"So we could walk in a ruined city?"

"If that's what you want."

"Oh, my dear idiot. Then stay. Just stay here, with me. There's nothing to ruin, here."

"No, there isn't." The duke's voice, thin and flat, mud gone to ice. "Is that it? Have you simply lost your edge?"

A sigh. "Do you think I have?"

"You don't want challenge. How could you take one up, as you are?"

"I don't need that sort of challenge now."

"They would be looking at you there." The voice was honed like cold iron. "Looking at you, and you not know it. That's the challenge you can't take up. It's not their swords that vex you, it's their eyes. Isn't it? Not that they might kill you—you'd probably welcome that. But they might see you first, and know."

"Does it give you pleasure, my lord, to think that?"

"It is, believe me, one of my more comfortable theories. What else is there? That it bores you, our city where we were together? That you don't mind if I drop in from time to time, but really I bore you, too?"

"That is not so."

"Oh, then it's yes, you love me, yes, you want me, but not all that much? Not enough to risk being seen first, unknowing? Yes, you still love me, but in the end I'm not worth it to you. You'd kill for me, but you wouldn't give up an ounce of your pride. I'm not worth that to you, in the end, am I?"

"Hush, Alec, hush."

"Leave me alone. I want brandy."

"That's not what you want. Come here."

"I'm not your lackey. I don't come and go at your command."

"Please, then. Please come to me."

"I hate this." The low voice shook the room with misery. "I can't stand it."

"Come to me. That's better. Yes. You smell of smoke—ash—you've been in a tavern. Your hair—ah!—you washed it at home. Chypre. Something else —citron—barber—fish on your hands, your fingertips—walnuts—bitter—"

And I was dreaming of all those things and more, dreaming them thrown onto a fire that consumed but did not consume them, that fed but was never satisfied. The old sun was devoured by the new, and gave its strength to light a new year, in the course of a long night whose dawn seemed never to come.

My uncle shook me awake. "Get your things. We're going."

He stood a long way above me. I saw him filmed with grey, as though the whole air of the cottage were thick with the ash of last night's bonfire.

I tried to find my feet, but they were tangled in the blankets. I raised myself on my arms. They shook under me.

"She's ill."

"She's just hung over." He pulled my arm. "Come on."

I was standing up. The master put a cup of water in my hands, and lifted them to my mouth. I drank. My throat hurt.

"Alec," he said. "You drugged her."

"I didn't poison her. I just didn't want her bothering us. If she's sick, I'll take her to a doctor back in town. Come on."

I could see where my feet went if I thought about it.

"What about your guests?"

"They'll find their own way home. They can walk into Highcombe village."

The master laughed. "You're leaving them, are you? I wonder if they've made a bonfire of your furniture."

"There's plenty of furniture." The duke gripped my arm. "Come on."

"You're leaving? Now?"

"We're leaving. Come on."

The carriage was cold. The drowsy footmen piled us with rugs. My uncle chewed on his thumb and said nothing. We bumped across the frozen rutted drive. The further we went, the more I shivered. He took out a flask of brandy, placed it against my teeth. I was crying, I think. I drank. I slept.

I woke up coughing. The carriage was swimming with sweet, heavy fumes. But I was warm. My uncle held me in his cloak. I watched the pipe rise to his lips, and felt his breath expand and collapse against me. Again, and again, like a cradle rocking.

His breaths were forming curls around me. "Richard," he said. "Richard."

Part III

RIVERSIDE

chapter I

I LAY IN A CAVE OF DEEPEST BLUE, STAR-SPANGLED with silver crowns. I was explaining to Betty that I must not sleep in Tremontaine's bed; I could

sleep on the floor next to the master. But every time I tried to explain something especially important, she'd make me drink a bitter potion. It was annoying, because it made it impossible for me to get up and practice, and at one point I was quite sure that the villainous Mangrove was coming to Highcombe, and if I didn't defeat him he would set it on fire. I was very hot and very cold and my eyes ached. I was very tired, too. Eventually I slept without trying to explain anything.

When I woke up I was thirsty, but my starry cave had become only curtains: silk velvet with silver embroidery, hung around a heavy, old-fashioned bed of dark wood. I pulled back a velvet corner.

Sunlight sifted in through the narrow windows of the room. The walls were paneled with dark wood, hung with old tapestries. I heard a chair scrape; a boy appeared in the gap in the bedcurtains, one finger in a book.

"You stir," he said. "I was told to give you this if you stirred." He handed me a cool goblet. I drank; it was not bitter.

"I'm Marcus," he said. "I work for the duke."

I remembered him from my first days in the city; a boy about my age, with brown hair and brown eyes. His voice was deeper than I remembered.

"You took ill on the road," Marcus said. "But your fever's broken. Now, I expect you'll be bored."

"I'm tired," I said. "How did you get here?"

"Where?"

"Isn't this Highcombe?"

"No. You're back in the city. The oldest part of the city, actually; you're in the Riverside house."

"Oh." I realized that the ride in the smoky carriage had been real, and the feast at Year's End, too, all those dreams were real—which meant that my master was gone, and Highcombe was gone, and even if I could find my way back there, nothing would be as it had been.

I didn't even have the strength to care if I cried or not. Marcus kindly dropped the bedcurtains closed so I could do it in private.

BEING SURROUNDED BY FLOWERS IN ARTEMISIA'S ROOM should have been enough for the two girls, but it was only the prelude to the important task of passing judgment on their senders. The man who was under discussion now

would have been horrified to hear that his considerable bouquet was being subjected to a very knowing scrutiny. But then, the girls had been reading aloud to each other while they sewed—so that their mamas would not say they did nothing but waste time together—and it had affected their outlook, not to mention their speech patterns.

"Armand Lindley," Lydia Godwin sighed. "I like him very much, but in all honesty, he isn't a bit like Fabian."

"That's all right," said her friend; "you aren't a bit like Stella."

Lydia looked crossly at Artemisia Fitz-Levi. No one likes being told that they do not resemble the heroine of their favorite novel, and while it was true that Lydia was unlikely to become pregnant by a swordsman of dubious reputation, like any young girl she liked to think that she could attract one to commit folly for her sake.

But Artemisia was smiling cheerfully, and offering her more of her favorite biscuits, which both of them knew were bad for their complexions, so Lydia decided not to take offense.

"He does have melting eyes." Lydia returned to her current obsession. "Like Fabian's trusted Tyrian, now I think on it."

"I wonder if he is as steady."

"I begin to doubt it." Lydia tossed her head. Artemisia greatly admired her pearl drops. The earrings were Godwin heirlooms, and perhaps should not have been worn on an afternoon visit, but Lydia was so proud of them that she wore them whenever she could. "Oh, Mi, what shall I do? I was sure, when he sent those flowers the next morning, that he had enjoyed the dance as much as I did! He pressed my hand, as well."

"Many men send flowers; but when they press your hand, what else are you to think? No, he loves you, it's sure."

"But then why did he not call yesterday? I made certain he knew I would be at home! No, no man who sends flowers and then fails to call can be said to be in love."

"What kind of flowers were they?"

"Roses, I told you."

"Roses…all roses, or mixed?"

"Roses with carnations. White and red."

"Mixed, that's bad. Though white and red is good. It could mean your complexion, or even heart and soul. Was there a note?"

"Of course." Lydia slipped it from her reticule. "Here, see what you think."

"'To the most adorable of all the Godwins,'" her friend read. "'With the fond admiration of her devoted Armand Lindley.'"

Lydia shrieked and fell back on the sofa cushions. "*Fond! Devoted!* Oh, Artemisia, I shall perish! How dare he so trifle with my heart?"

"What I wonder about is *adorable*," the other girl considered. "*Fond* and *devoted* are well enough, true, but is *adorable* what a lover says? It sounds—forgive me, Lydia—rather *papa*-ish for a lover."

Lydia fished a handkerchief from the reticule as she began to sniffle. "Oh, no. I cannot bear for him to mean it so."

"Of course, it might mean something else entirely, my sweet."

"I do think it must. After all, he is not old enough for a papa. And," she twinkled, "I do not feel at all daughterly when Armand leads me onto the dance floor. In fact, it makes me feel quite like Stella. After the ball."

"'I was a girl before tonight,'" Artemisia quoted with half-closed eyes; "'I am a woman now.'"

"Yes," Lydia breathed. "I fear I must have him or die. But how can I let him know, when he does not come to see me?"

"I expect he is delayed on business, or ill. Only think, there may be a letter waiting for you at home right now."

Lydia jumped up. "Oh, do you think?"

Artemisia patted her hand and pulled her friend to her on the window seat. "Very likely. You must tell me the moment you hear from him!"

"Oh, yes! But—what if Papa does not let me answer him?"

"Why should he not? If you may receive Lindley's flowers and visits…"

"Well, a letter is more serious, you know. Of course I show all mine to Papa and Mama—"

"*All* of them, Lydie?" her friend teased.

"Well…" she admitted, "yes."

"Even the ones that might be, say, hidden in a bunch of flowers?" Artemisia wriggled with pleasure. "Those are the very best."

"My maid is instructed to shake them out before she gives them to me. It is because of Papa's position. Now that he is to assume the post of Raven Chancellor and be back in the Inner Council, we must be very careful again."

"What a good girl you are, to be sure. We should all strive to imitate you. But what possible objection to your suitor can Lord Godwin have? Armand Lindley will most likely inherit the estate and become Lord Horn after his uncle's death. I think it a very good match indeed."

"Of course it is. But I have heard Papa say that all the Horns have evil tempers and goatish dispositions…"

"He cannot mean Lord Armand! He is thinking of someone else. Have you told him how you feel?"

Lydia blushed. "I dare not tell Papa. He has a very poor opinion of all young men. Why, just the other day he said at breakfast to Mama, quite loudly, so I could hear, 'The thought of any of them coming near our Lydia chills my blood. I know what they're made of. Perhaps we'd better'—oh, Mi, it was so awful—'Perhaps we'd better lock her in a tower until she is old and ugly!'"

Artemisia shrieked and hugged her. "He cannot mean it! What did your mama say?"

"She just gave him a look and sighed, 'Oh, Michael,' the way she does. Perhaps they had one of their little talks together; they left the table shortly thereafter, and I did not see them again until past noon, when he was much better-tempered."

"I am sure she will set him right. Your mama is such an angel."

"As are you, dear Artemisia."

DAYS PASSED. I ATE AND DRANK AND SLEPT. I CRIED A lot, and my head ached and I missed my mother; kind and careful as she was, Betty did not have the cool hands and sweet voice I loved when I was ill. I tried not to think about it, and I tried not to cry when Betty was there. It wasn't her fault, any of it.

As soon as I could stand up by myself, I went to the window to look out. The window was made up of little squares. The glass was thick and greenish; the little square panes had circles in them. The murky view was of snow and the corner of a roof. I didn't think much of Riverside so far.

When Betty saw that I was well enough to get up by myself, she made me try on all my clothes so she could have them altered. I had gotten taller, thinner in some places and thicker in others. There were new clothes for me in the wardrobe, town suits for winter: one bottle-green fustian with gold piping, one a deep blue wool with threads woven into it that made it almost crimson in the light. I supposed the new clothes meant the duke was pleased with me. But I didn't believe they meant I would be going back to Highcombe any time soon. So I didn't much care.

At first I was only well enough to sit up and walk about for a few hours each day. The rest of the time I was amazingly tired, and, as there was nothing to keep me from sleeping, I slept. Betty sat with me and told me servants' gossip about the household: Cook was a dear, but the steward down here, Master Osborne, thought altogether too highly of himself! If she had been drinking before she came in, she never drank while she was with me. As I thought I was doing her good, I tried to keep her by me. I heard all about Riverside, too, and so I found out at last who my master at Highcombe really was.

Of course I should have known. Even I had heard of St Vier, the greatest swordsman of our time, some said of any.

Everyone knew that he had dueled in the streets of Riverside and killed men in taverns and alleys to protect and amuse a mysterious runaway student, who later became the Duke Tremontaine.

"You wanted to watch out," Betty reminisced, "when those two were around. Riverside then wasn't like Riverside now: you had to be clever to live here, or stupid, or brave. We lived by our wits in those days, and took our luck where we could find it."

"Did you know them then?"

"Not know them like you'd *know* them, exactly," she slurred. I waited for her to untangle herself. "But I saw the pair of them, along with everyone else. Hard to miss. *Him* towering like a raggedy scarecrow in that flapping black scholar's gown, and the sword always quiet next to him, sweet as honey, and poison with it. Taverns would quiet when those two came in. Where would the fight be, and how would it start? Sometimes there wasn't a fight at all, and sometimes the night ended in blood. Real blood, not like now. But that was Riverside in those days. You didn't care so much how you died, as long as you did it well."

No one knew where St Vier had gone, not even Betty; some said he'd been killed in a fight—or poisoned, because he couldn't be killed by steel. Some said he'd found another lover, far away, where even the duke couldn't touch him, unless it was that the duke had killed him when he'd learned of it. Betty had also heard that St Vier had been wooed away by the Empress of Cham, to rule at her side in her palace over the sea. But she didn't believe that.

The man at Highcombe had not seemed like a legend to me, not while I was there with him. It was hard to imagine my teacher here, in this house, in the city, doing the things Betty said he had done. But back when it was

different? When Riverside was the forest he'd stalked through, and he a young man who thought he would not live to be twenty-five?

At least it explained why I could never even come close to winning a fight with him.

THE ONE THING BETTY COULD NOT DO WAS READ TO me; like the swordsman, she had never learned how. The duke's Riverside house boasted a large library, but it seemed to be heavily stocked with modern, scholarly works.

"Ask the boy," Betty said. "That Marcus. He goes where he likes, goes back and forth. Does what he likes, too. Yesterday Cook caught him eating cream from the pot, bold as you please. Complained to His Grace, but duke said he's a growing boy, let him alone. You're growing, too, but you don't take liberties. Better brought-up, you are."

I wasn't sure how I felt about being compared, even favorably, to a Riverside servant. But I only said, "He's the duke's man, not mine. Why should he do anything for me?"

"If you didn't still look like something the cat dragged in, my lady, I'd say he'd taken a fancy to you, always hanging around here when he should be off keeping His Grace from jumping off roofs and his other fool nonsense. Not that I'm complaining; working for Tremontaine is being in Seventh Heaven next to…but never mind about that. Just tell that boy what you need; you'll see."

So I asked Marcus to send to the Hill for picture books and lighter matter.

He brought them to me himself: a book of birds, and one of poisonous plants, some poetry, an illustrated geography called *Customs of Many Lands*, and, tucked in amongst them, a surprisingly familiar little worn volume of soft leather.

I did not thank him for it, nor ask him how he had found it, just slipped it directly under my pillow to examine when I was alone.

It was my very own copy of *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*. I recognized the stain on the third page, where I had dripped apricot juice. I opened the book at random, expecting now to find it silly stuff. But it opened to Stella's escape from the city, right after she's lost the child and thinks Fabian's betrayed her, with Mangrove hot on her heels. No one could find that silly.

Stella wants to despair, but Tyrian won't let her. *You have done tonight,* he says, *what ten thousand men could not. Now show your great enemies what one woman alone can do.*

I am not alone, she says, and is about to make Tyrian very happy indeed when the hunting cats appear on the rooftops.

I did not read the book straight through. I read my favorite parts, and then the bits between them. Fabian still never practiced. Stella still nearly ruined everything by keeping secrets from those she should have trusted. But it didn't seem to matter. If anything, I knew now that people were even stranger and more unpredictable than that, and that when we don't know the truth about someone, we will make it up ourselves.

A FEW DAYS LATER, MARCUS BROUGHT ME THE SWORD.

"From one of the country estates," he said, "for you, along with a big bag of fresh game, which is a good thing, I can tell you: I am getting awfully tired of fish."

It was the basket-hilted sword I had practiced with at Highcombe. One of his, one of my master's swords, mine now. I slipped it on a belt, along with the twisted dagger the duke had given me. The weight settled comfortably on my hips, one balancing the other.

"I'm going out," I told Marcus. He looked me over and nodded.

I was lightheaded in the bright day, and did not go far. Snow crumbled under my feet—I was glad my boots were of the best—and wind cut through from both sides of the river. Everything in Riverside was timber and stone and plaster: old houses with crumbling fronts, some missing windows, some set with coats of arms, their stone worn away like melting butter over the centuries. The houses were clustered up against one another as if they were afraid to let in too much sky, as if to be sure nothing would grow there. Still, there were weeds frozen in the cracks between the cobbles of those streets so narrow no carriage could pass through.

I felt someone following me. I'm not sure how, but I had learned the feel of a stalk now. I looked for the nearest tree, found the corner of a house, stepped behind it and drew the untipped sword.

It was a boy, younger than me—or at least smaller. He had no sword, no coat either. "Pal," he rasped, looking past the blade right at me. "Hey, pal, you

got any money?"

I would have given him some if I had any. But I was not carrying a purse. I shook my head. The rake of his eyes up and down, from my thick boots to fur collar and hat, showed what he thought of that.

"Help me out," he whined; "I won't hurt ya."

I shook my head again, helpless, but I started to sheathe my sword. He fumbled in his shirt and pulled out a knife, flat-bladed and worn.

"Give me what you've got."

"No." *For death, you want the heart, the throat, the eye*…I was not going to kill this boy. I would not. This was awful; there was no challenge here, no rules, no purpose but survival. I moved, he yelped, there was blood on the snow. I was fairly sure I'd only touched his hand. But he was gone before I could really see.

"Nice work." It was a woman's voice. She stepped out from the shadows of the house across from me, holding the edges of a tatty green velvet cloak heavily lined. Her red hair was dyed so bright she looked like a holly bush. "You really know how to use your blade. How about a drink for you?"

I felt so tired I couldn't answer. I nodded, followed her. "You new here?" Her voice was a pleasant purr. She moved through the streets with confidence, barely even looking to avoid ruts and puddles. "You a foreigner? Can't you speak? A drink, definitely, and then you can tell me all about yourself."

I realized, suddenly, what she wanted of me, what she thought was going on. I stopped in the grey patch of light between the darker shadows of the houses. "I'm a girl," I said. "I'm the Duke Tremontaine's niece."

"Is that a fact?" She squinted into my face, and shook her head. "He gets crazier every year." The red-haired woman shrugged. "Well, you tell him Ginnie says hello. Ginnie; he'll know who you mean."

I was going to tell him nothing of the kind. So far, I had not seen my uncle, and I was just as glad to keep it that way.

"Well, good-bye," I said, "and thank you for the—for the offer—"

"You should buy *me* one, young Tremontaine."

"When I have money, I will," I said lamely.

"Doesn't he give you any, your rich uncle?" Ginnie snorted. "You make him pay you what you're worth. He can afford it."

OUTSIDE TREMONTAINE'S RIVERSIDE HOUSE THE SNOW was wet and trampled w horse and cart tracks. It wasn't really one house; it was a twisting series of them, distinguished from the others around it by well-kept facades: the stone pointed, the shutters painted, the slate roofs and the gutters in perfect trim. I had made the mistake, when I left, of not looking behind me to note which door I'd come out of. Now I had to choose one at random, or rather, apply to one, for the doors of the duke's Riverside house were gated and guarded. Luckily, they had orders to admit me.

I passed into a stone hall hung with tapestry, a huge fireplace and dark stairs carpeted in red. It looked like the right one; I remembered the tapestry. Up the stairs and down a hallway with windows that seemed a bit narrower than mine. I had decided that I was in fact lost when I heard voices: lots of people laughing, like a party. I knocked. Getting no answer, I opened the door.

The room was full of naked people.

"Shut the door, it's cold!"

My uncle the Mad Duke strode amongst them in a very beautiful dressing gown. He saw me.

"Ah! You're up. Good."

He had a bottle of brandy in one hand, and began tipping it down the throat of an upside down man with his knees hooked around the bedpost. There wasn't a stitch on him; if I had ever wondered how accurate the classical statues in the gardens of Tremontaine house were, I certainly knew now.

I started to back out.

"Don't you want a drink?" drawled the duke. "Everyone else does."

I heard my own voice, quiet and still. "I am not like everyone else."

The upside down people wriggled and laughed, reaching for him and for each other. I was terrified that they would soon reach for me.

"Bravo." He swigged on the bottle, just out of their reach. "Bravo, Lady Katherine."

There was no one between me and the door. "Oh, by the way," I told Tremontaine, doubtful of just how much longer he'd still be standing to hear anything, "Ginnie says hello."

"Does she indeed?" The duke looked hard at me, swaying. "She always wants what's mine. Miserable cow. You tell Ginnie Vandall the moment she touches you, her pension's gone; I don't pay her to meddle in my affairs—"

That was all I heard before my hand closed on the safety of the doorlatch. I didn't understand, and I didn't want to.

chapter II

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN CHURLISH, WHEN LYDIA GODWIN received an offer of marriage from Lord Armand Lindley, for her dear friend Artemisia to be anything but delighted at her friend's good fortune. With the Godwin and Lindley families' glowing approval, they were quickly betrothed and a wedding date set for the spring. But Lady Artemisia had always believed she herself would be the first to capture a husband, and she had to be careful not to think of that while congratulating Lydia and listening to her endless plans for the future. Of course, Lydia vowed a hundred times a day that even marriage to the sweetest man alive would never alter her eternal bond with her dearest Mi.

So said Lydia as they sat together in Artemisia's window seat, dark and fair curls bent over the scraps of ribbon she had brought so that her friend could help her decide what colors she should trim the table with for her betrothal dinner. But the young lady was sensitive enough to note when her friend began to tire of the details of her upcoming nuptials, and she leaned back in the window seat and said encouragingly, "Now come, tell me about your suitors."

Artemisia crunched a biscuit. "What suitors?" If she could not be a blushing betrothed, it would be best to take on the air of someone much

wearied with the follies of courtship. "It is all very tedious. I go to dances, I receive flowers, but there is no one who touches my heart."

"But surely there must be *one*—what about Greg Talbert? He is poor, but of ancient lineage and utterly mad for you."

"Oh, him." Artemisia rolled her eyes in what she trusted was a jaded way. "Last week's news, my dear. All talk, no action."

Her friend hissed in delighted horror. "You don't mean that!"

Artemisia lowered her eyelids. She had seen Lady Hetley doing that, and thought it looked very sophisticated. "Do I not?"

"Well, then, what about Lord Ferris? He's certainly been paying you marked attention."

Artemisia shrieked. "As a *lover*? But he is so *old*!" She recollected her sophistication and smiled wryly. "He has polish, I'll give him that. And he's sent the most adorable roses—here, smell."

"Mmm, lovely." Lydia buried her face in the blossoms. "Expensive, too. Well, then—Terence Monteith?"

"Snowdrops." Her friend gestured.

"Even so…it's clear he's vastly taken with you."

She yawned. "Oh, he's pretty enough, but a terrible bore. Besides, what are the Monteiths? He is only a second son; what can he offer a wife? He'll be back to the country as soon as he's found one, to manage his brother's estate. I want a city life, and jewels, and gowns. How I envy you your Lindley, dearest!"

Lydia blushed. "Hardly mine. But I would not care were Armand as poor as a goatherd. I think I could live with him anywhere, if I could just feel his strong arm around me, and look into his eyes and know he loves me."

"There." Artemisia sighed. "That is true love. I believe it has made a woman of you already, Lydia, indeed I do. Your eyes—yes, there is a grave beauty in them that was never there before." She took her friend's face in her hands. "How I envy you!"

"Oh, dearest Mi."

Lady Artemisia's maid interrupted these girlish confidences with the news that her father required her immediate presence in the morning room. And so the friends were forced to part, with mutual assurance of future consultations.

THE MORNING ROOM CONTAINED BOTH FITZ-LEVI parents. Artemisia made her curtseys, and wondered frantically what she might have done wrong this time. They could not possibly have found out about the parrot. If they had, she'd kill her maid, truly she would.

"Daughter," her papa said, "there's very good news for you." Not the parrot, then. Maybe her dress bill had been lower than she thought, or the shoemaker had lost her receipts. "Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris, Crescent Chancellor of the Council of Lords, has asked our permission to pay his addresses to you, and if you agree, we'll begin the thing at once."

Artemisia felt the room grow exceedingly hot, and the next thing she knew, she was sitting on the couch, smelling spirits of hartshorne.

"There, Fitz," her mother said, "I knew you'd make a botch of it." Lady Fitz-Levi took her hand. "Listen, child, one of the most important nobles in the city wants to make you the mother of his heirs and mistress of his establishment. There's not a girl in town but will be sick with envy. (Nor a mother, neither, I'll warrant!) You let him pay his court to you, and we'll make certain Lord Ferris makes a very decent settlement and allowance on you: all the dresses you want, shoes, jewels, gloves—and the houses, of course, furnished to your liking. Your dowry is nothing to sneeze at, and we mean you to live properly. You'll be one of the first ladies of the city, right after Lady Godwin, what do you think of that?" Artemisia managed to smile. "Lording it even over your friend Lydia and the rest of that family, how's that, then?"

Artemisia drew in what felt like her first full breath of air. "Yes, Mama. Thank you, Mama."

Her father leaned over the back of the couch. "How about a kiss for your dear papa, then? Pretty chit, I don't know how he could resist you—Of course, he couldn't, could he? Ha ha!"

Her father smelt of whiskey and barber's scent. Lord Ferris, she thought, was possibly even older. But contrary to her father's cozy sloppiness, Ferris was lean and fastidious; elegant, even. He was always dressed to the fashion, and knew exactly what to say.

Her mother picked up a flat box from the sideboard and brandished it in front of her. "He left you a gift, miss, and not only flowers this time."

Artemisia took the box and opened it.

A necklace nestled in the velvet folds: a delicate collar, designed just right for a young girl's daily wear, in the very latest style. But the twisted web was gold, the dangling jewels sapphires.

For the most exquisite woman in the city, the note with it said, *with the heart of Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris.*

Artemisia breathed in her gilded fate. She wondered what Lydia would say.

chapter III

EVEN WHEN I WAS HEALTHY AGAIN, MY UNCLE'S manservant still came to see me. Marcus liked to read, it seemed. He brought me a book of poems and wondered if we might discuss them.

"It's a new movement," he said. "The scholars are all mad for it; they think it mixes sentiment with science."

I did try. The new poetry seemed to have a lot to do with spheres: the motions of the heavens and the motions of the heart. But I'd never learned much about the motions of the heavens, except by observation. I thought of the glittering night skies at Highcombe, the keen air and the silence by the fire. I looked at the words on the page, and felt too defeated to keep at it.

Nothing was said about sword lessons, so I practiced on my own. The hall outside my room was long and no one much seemed to come there; after a while, Betty got used to checking before she turned the corner. I began not only to drill, but to construct opponents in my mind and fight my shadow self. Sometimes their style was like the master's, as he was the best I knew. I wondered what it would be like to fight Venturus now. Sometimes I played that game, and then I always won.

I went out a lot, wrapped in coat and scarf and hat. Most people made Ginnie's mistake, calling me "sir" because they could see nothing of me but

clothes and sword. I did not have cause to draw it again; with the duke's men so thick about the place, Riverside was not what it had been in the master's day. There were guards and footmen and messengers in livery, but not all the duke's people wore the Tremontaine silver and green. On the streets I recognized men I had seen in the house, and knew they were about Tremontaine's business. Just what that business was I only got inklings of from Betty; it was all a lot of names I didn't recognize, and money, and veiled threats, and threats enforced. When I mentioned Ginnie to her, Betty said, "Poor thing. You stay away from that Ginnie Vandall. She knows how to make herself useful, but not to you." I didn't ask her any more; none of it made sense, anyway. It was all my uncle the duke's business, not mine.

MARCUS BROUGHT ME A GOLD-CHASED CLASP.

"What's this?"

"It's for your hair. If you're going to go around with hair like a student, you should at least do what they do, and tie it back."

It was too rich to be a gift from Marcus. "Is it one of *his*?"

"He won't miss it."

"I don't want it."

Marcus grinned. "I thought you might say that." He fished a bit of crumpled black ribbon from his pocket. "Here. Try this."

Without looking in a mirror, I pulled the hair back from my face and tied it.

"Where are you going, anyway, Kate?"

"I don't know. Out."

"You could get lost down here."

"I've been out. I always find my way back. It's not as though everyone doesn't know where this place is."

"True." He went over to the windows, started scraping patterns in the frost with his fingernail. "Last year, the river froze solid and we skated under the bridge."

"I can skate. We skate on the duck pond, at home."

"That's right, you're from the country. I've only been once. Hated it."

"Why?"

He frowned. "Too noisy."

I had to laugh. “Riverside’s not noisy?”

“Well…” Marcus scraped spirals around spirals. “But the noise here is—it’s only people. You know where you are.”

I said, “They never sleep. I hear them at all hours of the night. I woke up, went to my window last night, and there were men staggering by with torches.”

Marcus shrugged. “The duke gives parties. It’s different, here, from on the Hill. Especially in winter. The rooms here are smaller. Do you want to see?”

“Explore the house? I thought—I thought I was supposed to keep out of his way.”

“Did you?” He turned his plain face and brown, open gaze to me. “I don’t have any orders.”

He did it a little too well. I thought suddenly, Oh, you do too have orders. The duke’s personal servant wouldn’t be spending free time with me because he wanted to. I wondered, was he supposed to find out if I was mad or vengeful? To keep me distracted? To cheer me up?

“Show me your room,” I commanded. “You’ve been in mine. Now show me yours.”

A hundred years ago, when I was a girl at home, I would never have invaded a servant’s privacy. But in the Mad Duke’s house, who Marcus was and what I was were not so clearly delineated. And if Marcus was spying on me, I wanted some parity.

“If you like.” My rudeness did not seem to bother him. But he was used to my uncle’s whimsies.

Some of the halls were white and new; others were strings of little old chambers, paneled in worm-eaten wood. As we passed from house to house what was under our feet changed, too: some floors were stone, some wood, some tile. There were steps and doorways to mark the passages, but you had to watch for the sudden shifts. The sounds of the street were muffled here, and there were closed doors everywhere. Once, though, we burst into the light of a gallery which ran the length of a courtyard in which people were drawing water from an old stone well.

I was fairly certain that Marcus was taking me the long way round to his quarters. I couldn’t blame him.

In a hall with diamond-paned windows, he stopped at a tall dark door.

“Here.”

I had expected a small room under the eaves, or at least at the top of the simplest of stairs, whitewashed and minimally furnished. Marcus's room was larger than mine. The walls were polished oak, hung with contemporary landscapes and a couple of maps. There was a row of books, and a jet-and-ivory shesh set on a table by the window seat. The bed was new, as well, with good woolen hangings and a huge feather quilt, puffed almost to perfect symmetry at the corners.

I couldn't say any of the things I was thinking.

There were thick cushions on the window seat. Marcus plopped himself down on one, utterly comfortable. The richness of the room did not embarrass him, nor my conjectures about his special status with the duke. Which could, of course, be wrong—

"Do you play shesh?" he asked.

"Only a little. I know the moves, but I'm not very good."

"Sit down," he said. "You'll get better if you play more."

I sat. He put a black and a white peon in either fist, and I picked for color and first move, and then we started to play. He watched me carefully, like a swordsman. It made me nervous, but I pretended to ignore it.

A blow on heavy wood made the sheshmen shiver. Through thickness of wall I heard a scream. I'd missed the other door to the room—bad observation, always dangerous, my master reminded me. Marcus just sat there, swinging his foot. He wasn't pretending not to hear, but his only response was a little smile. There was a shout, and yet another crash on the other side of the door.

"I've got the room next to his," he explained.

"Really?"

"In case he needs anything."

It sounded as though someone had just dropped a sheet of glass. I put my hand on my knife, I couldn't help it. "Do you think he might—need anything now?"

Marcus shook his head. "Naw. It's just Raffaela. She gets mad when he lies on the floor and laughs at her. Then she starts throwing things, and then *he* does." I jumped as another one hit. "I wish he wouldn't. He's always sorry afterward. He doesn't really like things to get broken."

You wouldn't guess from the sound of it. "I thought he didn't like women," I ventured.

Marcus righted a shesh piece that had fallen over. "At this point, I'm not sure he can really tell the difference."

"Oh." They were making a lot of noise. "Doesn't he ever *stop?*"

"Not since you came back. He's been taking a lot of stuff, smoke and all, plus drinking. I have the feeling," Marcus said, carefully positioning a piece in the exact middle of its square, "that he did not really have a very nice time at Highcombe."

Now I understood. That was why he was sticking so close to me. Marcus wanted to know what had happened to the duke.

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "I was asleep through most of it. And I got sick."

Marcus nodded. "So did you know he'd brought young Davenant and two friends down with him for Year's End? Brought them, and abandoned them there in the Great Hall. Dark and freezing. No fire, no food, no beds, no light. They had to find their own way back to town." He shrugged. "Of course, they should have known better than to go with him. Probably they did. That seems to be what draws them. Now Davenant's father has sent him a nasty letter, and Galing's lawyer is requesting damages. Which is very stupid; it'll be all over town how the duke made fools of them. People do talk."

Something was beginning to make sense to me. "Is that why he does it?" I asked slowly. "Because no matter how badly he behaves, no matter what he does, he always gets other people to be worse? Or to feel as if they were?"

Marcus looked at me as though I were suddenly more interesting than the sheshmen. "I think so. But something at Highcombe made *him* feel bad. I didn't think it was Petrus Davenant."

I thought of the duke's face, lit by a tentative wonder and by the Year's End fire.

"No. I don't think it was."

"*Marcus!*" It was the duke shouting. "Marcus—show the lady out!"

"Oh, no." Marcus shook himself. "Not me. Last time I took hold of that one, she got me. She scratches. I'm calling the guards; they're dressed for it."

I sat alone in the middle of the sun-drenched room. Pointless to try to ignore what I could hear clearly enough: the woman screaming, "*Bastard! Bastard! I hate you!*" and the old wall shuddering as something struck it. I stood by the door, wondering how tiny a crack I could make opening it, but not quite willing to do it for fear of what I would see. "*I'm not some nobody, you know! Who's good enough for you, bastard, if I'm not?*"

I closed my eyes, listening in the dark as my master had taught me. The duke tripped over something, fell hard and cursed.

I thought suddenly, I'm training to be his guard. Should I rush in there? Would I be expected to stand watch over these—proceedings, someday? I snorted. What could I do with his discarded mistresses, skewer them from a standing thrust?

Then Marcus arrived with real guards, and I heard how it went. Definitely a job for someone else.

At last the next room was quiet, and Marcus sat back down on the window seat.

"Is she beautiful?" I asked.

"She's a singer. Famous, I think. Anyway, he heard her at a party, and next thing you know…!"

"What happened to Alcuin?"

"Who? Oh, him. Gone. Right after you, actually. He was a piece of work."

Marcus took a pear from a bowl, and handed me another. We ate in silence, then I said, "Let's go out."

Marcus shook his head. "Can't. He might need me."

I looked around at the luxurious room with its many diversions. "Do you want me to stay?" I tried not to let my reluctance show. "We could finish the game."

But to my boundless relief, he said, "No, better not. There'll be a lot of cleaning up to do."

"Don't the chambermaids…?"

"That's not what I meant. You go on, Kate. Have you tried the pies at Martha's yet?"

I felt myself dismissed, but was not sad to go.

LADY ARTEMISIA FITZ-LEVI, INTENDED BRIDE OF Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris, sat alone in her window seat with papers spread all over her lap, drawing up lists for her betrothal party. Her mother had tried to help her, and she had chased her mother out, certain she could do a better job herself. But it was harder than it looked, these questions of seating and decorating and precedence.

She was relieved when Dorrie told her Lucius Perry was at the door, and she admitted her cousin at once. He leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Congratulations, my lady! You've taken the prize, and no mistake. Everyone is pleased as the devil." He looked at her strained face. "But how are you?"

"Taxed," she said. "Lucius, I used to think all our friends were so agreeable, but here's Petrus Davenant and Albright Galing barely speaking to each other."

"Betrothal has sobered you up, I see." He sank gracefully into the chair by the window. "How sweet of you to be worrying about two unattached young men."

"Well, they used to be attached to each other, everyone knows that. And I wanted to invite them both to my betrothal party, as they're so amusing, but now if one of them is in the room, the other leaves it."

"Oh." Lucius Perry fiddled with his cuff. "That."

"Are you going to tell me, or are you just going to work at that buttonhole until you ruin it?"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "If you invite only one it must be Petrus Davenant, because his father is an associate of Lord Ferris, and if you invite Alb Galing, old Davenant won't come."

"I know that, goose. I just want to know why."

"Because Dav's father is going around telling everyone Alb corrupted his son."

"The hypocrite!"

"Not because they were 'attached,' but because the attachment led Dav to everyone's favorite opponent of all that is good and decent, the Mad Duke Tremontaine."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh. It all came to a head when the Mad Duke dumped them both in the country at Year's End, leaving them to get home by themselves."

"My mother would say it served them right. I should think Dav's father would be pleased."

"My dear Artemisia, try to see the full picture. It's political as well as personal: Lord Davenant and the duke are adversaries in Council, and Petrus Davenant knew it perfectly well when he took up with him." Artemisia gave him what she hoped was a knowing eye, but Lucius Perry was looking out the window. "It's the old story: boy comes to city, boy disobliges family, family hears about it, ructions ensue. Dav was lucky to have someone else to blame."

"Dear me!" Artemisia leaned forward in a rustle of striped taffeta, her papers forgotten. "I imagine Albright Galing doesn't think so. Is this politics? I suppose I am going to have to learn all about it, if I am to run Lord Ferris's household, and throw parties and all. Now…explain to me again just who hates who, and why?"

AS THE WINTER WENT ON, MARCUS AND I WORKED on our shesh. I was never going to beat him, but at least we could have a good game, now. If letting someone else get ahead is cheating, he cheated: sometimes I'd feel him watching me as I went move after move in the direction I'd planned, and just when I was congratulating myself, he'd swoop down with something that confounded all my strategies. I didn't mind, though. It was only a game. I had a real dueling partner, now: a sober young swordsman named Phillip Drake, who turned out also to have studied with Venturus.

Phillip demanded that I practice even more. He showed me no mercy in our bouts, and was always very happy to point out what I'd done wrong and what I might do to improve on it. When I did well, he only asked for more. As there was little else for me to do with my time, I practiced hard between lessons. I grew less and less tired at the end of our grueling bouts, and Phillip Drake had less and less to criticize. He said I had a long way to go, still, before he'd be happy contemplating me actually dueling a real opponent—"You're not as good as all that yet," he'd say; "but every once in a while, you do something…"

I did not tell him St Vier had been my other teacher, but he usually knew when I was departing from the ways of Venturus. When I broke through his guard, he'd stop, whistle, shake his head and say, "Well, it works, I guess. It isn't stylish, but it works."

BECAUSE I WAS OFTEN WITH MARCUS I DID SEE MORE of the duke, who required him to be close by where he could find him. And so I saw my uncle drunk and otherwise incapacitated, and I also saw him doing very normal things like going over accounts and dictating letters and approving dinner menus and ordering new curtains. He never spoke to me of Highcombe, or of swordplay, or much else. He tended to treat me like some friend of Marcus's

who had dropped in for a visit and might as well make herself useful while she was there. I helped Marcus to run errands, and began to learn my way around the house and around the city. I also took his lead on when to disappear; there were certain moments in Tremontaine's life, and certain visitors to the Riverside house, that no one was invited to witness.

We were sitting in the hallway outside a very splendid room hung in shades of azure and violet silk. That room always gave the impression of dusk, like twilight over a mountainside. We sat out in a sunlit embrasure, waiting for Marcus to be called for, and played knucklebones; Marcus didn't seem to know it was only a game for girls and was quite good at it.

A slightly built man with sleek black hair and fashionable clothes brushed softly past us on his way to the twilit room. Despite his finery, he moved like someone who knew how not to be noticed; he looked like a very stylish otter, swimming through the halls. So I looked hard at him, seeing the nice rings, the soft shoes, the very fine velvet and very wrinkled linen and the hair a little long, clearly tended to stay just that way. Hands that he held very still, even while he waited at the door to be admitted. I looked, and it occurred to me that I had seen him somewhere else, if only I could remember where.

"Who's that?" I whispered to Marcus.

"Who do you think?" When the young man had safely closed the door behind him, Marcus elaborated, "It's one of his fancy-boys. From Glinley's."

"Glinley's what?"

Marcus cleaned dirt from under his fingernail, saying casually, "Glinley's Establishment of Try-and-Guess…Well, why would you know, a nice girl like you? It's the finest brothel in Riverside. That fellow comes here once a week to pay a little visit. They won't be long." I stared at the door. "I like the way he looks harmless, don't you? But my dear, he is riddled with vice. He takes money for engaging in sexual congress with strangers. Are you shocked? Say you are shocked, Katie."

"Shut up, Marcus," I said automatically; but then, because I really did want to hear more, "I *am* shocked, I guess. But not because of that. I don't think he's really a—one of those brothel people. He's a nobleman. I've seen him before."

"Re-eally? Where?"

His drawl made me giggle. "You can't imagine who you sound like."

"What do you mean?"

But I did not have to answer him, because the door opened and the young man stepped out, his linen a little less disheveled. His back to us, his hand on the doorframe, he bowed into the room and said one word: "Tremontaine."

Then I knew where I'd seen him.

I clutched Marcus's sleeve, but said nothing because the man was turning towards us as he closed the door. I lowered my head and busied myself picking up knucklebones so he would not see and recognize me. He had laughed at me at my friend Artemisia's, when I went to her for help. Maybe it was his fault she'd never answered my letter. Maybe he was her brother, or one of her beaux. If so, she had no idea what he truly was.

It was Marcus who spoke up, bold as brass. In the duke's house, he feared nothing. "Do you need help, sir, finding the way out?"

"I know the way," he said mildly.

"Can I summon you a chair?"

The man's voice smiled. "I'll walk, thank you."

He turned down the hall away from us. As soon as he turned a corner, "*What's his name?*" I hissed in my friend's ear.

"I don't know it. Shall we ask the duke?"

"*No!* I'm going to follow him."

"You're *what?* Why? Katie, whatever is the matter with you? Why are we whispering?"

"I'll tell you later."

I noted which corridor the man turned down, and left the house by another door where I could see him leave and catch his direction. Marcus was right behind me. I gave him a *Go back!* glare, but he just grinned.

Our man crossed the Bridge into the lower city. It was a warm day for winter and the city stank. But dipping and dodging the people and puddles behind the mysterious man sent me back to the stalks with the master, the green green fields and trees, the silver sky, the cool wind's breathing and the musky deer waiting. It was strange to be in both at the same time. We left the docks behind, heading for the newer part of the city. The wider streets, more light, more air, made it harder to stay in the shadows, but there were more people and distractions to hide amongst.

Our young man went quickly. He seemed used to walking, and he knew his route well. He never checked behind him, and he did not stop to look at anything or to shop. Marcus stayed just behind me, only sometimes reaching out a hand to caution when I started to move forward too fast. It was hard

not to be distracted by the shops with their displays and tantalizing smells; here was a part of the city I'd never seen before, and I liked it very much. We seemed to be heading toward the Hill, though; perhaps he was leading us to his noble family's house, and then what? Maybe even back to Artemisia's…? But, no. He turned down a side street full of pretty little houses and gardens.

Marcus and I fell back on the quiet street, and sank into a doorway when our quarry stopped suddenly before a little gate. He had the key. We watched him slide it from inside his jacket, look up and down the street, then turn it in the lock, and slip like an afterthought through the gate and into the house.

We shot down an alley around the back. There was a garden wall, with a fruit tree limb hanging tantalizingly overhead. "Boost me up. I think I can—" But the tree branch wouldn't hold me, and I tumbled ingloriously back to earth, smudged with whitewash from the wall.

"You have to go over the *top*," Marcus said, uncharacteristically dancing with impatience. "Country girl, climbing trees. Anyone can see you've never tried to break into a house before."

"Don't come all Riverside with me," I growled. "You never have either, and I've skinned my palm." He produced a clean handkerchief. "Do you want to try again?"

"Not now," he said. "Maybe at night would be more…"

"Discreet?"

"Just so."

We noted the house, and started back downhill.

"That was fun," said Marcus, brushing whitewash off his knees. "Now are you going to tell me why we did it?"

"Marcus…do you remember that day, my first day on the Hill when you found me all lost and took me back home? I'd gone to see a girl I met at the duke's party, a girl my age who was there on a dare or something. When I went to visit her, *that man* was there, sitting in her day room. He said something nasty about Tremontaine House, I remember now."

"Did he? What a nerve. He's been coming there since last year, at least. And I don't see signs of him finding it especially nasty."

"Perhaps we ought to warn her. If he's a relative, or he's even courting her…don't you think she'd need to know he's doing this?"

"Living in a house near the Hill? It's not an outrage, that."

"First of all, we aren't sure he lives here, he's just got a key. Second, you know that's not what I meant. If I were betrothed to someone who worked at

Glinley's, I'd want to know it!"

He said, "Oh, I'm sure it won't come to that. Your uncle's weird, but he's not that weird." I ignored this. "Is your friend betrothed to him?"

"She's *something* to him, or he wouldn't have been with her that day. Maybe he's her brother, I don't know. But I think it's important. You're sure," I demanded, "about Glinley's?"

"Oh, yes."

"But are you sure about what he does there? Maybe he just does—other business."

"There is no other business at Glinley's." Marcus was smug. "I'm sure."

"But why would he work there if he didn't have to?"

"Maybe he does have to. Or maybe he's just bored," Marcus said airily, sounding more like the duke than ever, "and too lazy to relieve it any other way."

"Lazy? You think that's lazy?"

"Of course. Or he would take the trouble to learn something new. As we have. Everyone already knows how to copulate."

We had to be quiet while some people passed us: other servants, carrying baskets and looking harried.

"Well, why would he go all the way down to Riverside to do it?" I persisted.

"Glinley's," Marcus explained importantly, "is a very particular establishment. It is expensive, and caters to specialized tastes."

I did not know what he meant, but I wasn't going to tell him that. "Then I'm surprised the duke doesn't live there," I said tartly.

"He doesn't need to. He's part owner. Our man was bringing him his share of the take."

I drew breath hissing in between my teeth. "That's disgusting." We were passing into the part of the city with all the lovely shops in it. "Marcus," I said suddenly, "do you have any money on you?"

"A little. Why?"

"Could we go in somewhere and eat cakes? And drink chocolate?"

"We could."

"Well, I want to."

He said, "People are going to take you for an actress."

I looked down at my legs, encased in breeches and high boots. "As long as they let actresses drink chocolate, I don't mind."

We found a place called the Blue Parrot where they served us excellent cakes. When we'd eaten and drunk all we could afford, we went to the Ramble by the river and watched children running races with hobbyhorses. Then we were hungry again, and bought gingerbread with some coins I found in the bottom of my jacket pocket. We watched a trained dog jump through hoops, and heard a fiddler playing "Maiden's Fancy," and whistled it all the way home.

The duke met us on the stairs of the Riverside house. He looked sober and displeased. "Do you have any idea what time it is? No, I suppose you were off courting murder and mayhem, and couldn't be bothered to wonder whether any was occurring at home."

"We went out for gingerbread." I offered him the bag. He took a piece and ate it.

"Well, I've been calling all over for you," he said, licking powdered cinnamon off his fingers. "I can't find my—" For the first time, he looked fully at Marcus. "Why is there dirt on your knees?"

Marcus looked down. "I dropped my money. When we were buying the gingerbread. I had to pick it up."

"Oh? And did Lady Katherine drop hers, too?"

My own breeches had a smear of whitewash from the wall we'd climbed, plus mud from where I fell. "I was helping."

"Nice try." The duke was smiling with the pleasure undoing a knotty problem gave him. "But a couple more questions, asked of you independently, and your whole story would unravel. You see—" he crouched down so he wasn't towering over us—"it's not street dirt, for one thing; it's whitewash and garden mud. Your palms are scratched. And this is Robertson gingerbread, with the cinnamon, and that is not sold on the street."

I felt at once very annoyed, and thrilled with the sort of challenge that a good swordfight gave me. "Some boys knocked us down and ran off."

Amused, the duke's eyes glowed green deep behind his crinkled features. "The gingerbread bag was closed at the time? And where did they push you down?"

"On the West Bank," Marcus said, "by the river."

The duke unfolded himself back up to his full height. "It is very annoying, I know," he drawled, "to have to account for all your time to someone older than you are. Very annoying. But I take care to be an annoying person."

"I give you my word," I said earnestly, as I had heard my brothers do when they'd been caught out, "we didn't do anything—"

"Gingerbread," Marcus overrode me coolly. "Katie told you."

Tremontaine's hand flashed out and gripped his shoulder. The sudden movement had sent my hand to my swordhilt; I admired my friend's ability not to flinch. "Marcus," he said, "I had a visitor this afternoon. You offered to fetch him a chair, and then you disappeared."

"He didn't want the chair. If you heard me asking, you heard what he said back."

"Katherine, please take your hand from your sword. It's a bad habit to get into; it makes people think you're about to start a fight."

I saw Marcus press his lips against the sharp grip on his shoulder. But I took my hand from my hilt; I did, indeed, know better than that.

"Do you know this man's name?"

"No," I said, and the duke lessened his grip on Marcus and turned to me.

"Then why did you follow him?"

I looked at Marcus; Marcus looked at me.

"You were seen," the duke said, "leaving the house after him."

I shrugged. "We lost him in the city."

"I'm going to ask you again. Why did you follow him?"

I drew in my breath, opened my mouth to ask him the questions only he could answer—and then I shut it again. He had plenty of his own secrets already. This one was ours. "For a test," I said. "I'm learning to be a swordsman. This is part of it."

"Did Master Drake assign you this test?"

"No." I stared him in the eyes, telling him where I had learned it, and from whom.

The duke looked away. "Well, then," he said. "If you lost him so easily, you'd better practice harder. Just not on my guests, that's all."

We started to turn away, but the duke's voice stopped us, hard and serious. "Understand this, both of you, about people who come to this house. Their business is my business. Their secrets are my secrets. Stalk whom you like, but not my guests. Like just about everyone in the city but you, it seems, that man is not supposed to be here. It would go very ill for him if anyone outside this house learned of his presence here. Do you understand?"

Marcus looked down at the floor. "We're sorry." I nodded in agreement, looking penitent as a good niece should.

"Where's the rest of that gingerbread?" my uncle asked.

We shared it out, and then went down to the kitchen together looking for more cake. The pastry cook was creating little icing flowers to decorate something. The duke appropriated the flowers and bore them and us off to the library, where we saw the sun down playing a complicated gambling game using them as tokens, joined by a couple of resident scholars. Winners got to eat their own sweets; Marcus occasionally was sent down for more plates of flowers to keep the game going. No one wanted any supper—instead, the scholars started quizzing each other on points so obscure that the joking guesses Marcus and I threw out were sometimes right. Candles were lit. The duke scrambled up and down ladders fetching volumes to adjudicate between them.

The night went on, the candles burned down and we sent for more, and the kitchen started sending up jellies and syllabubs, along with cakes decorated with the little flowers. The duke's homely friend Flavia came in, looking for a book, but she refused to play. She picked a few flowers off the cakes, listened for a bit, and then said, "I didn't know it was possible to get drunk on sugar, but I think you've managed it," and went off grumbling. She may have been right, though. One moment I was screaming with laughter, and the next it was all I could do to keep from falling asleep on the window seat.

"The untroubled dreams of youth," one scholar said, and the duke asked me, "Where did you learn so much about the Battle of Pommerey?" and Marcus said, "Bedtime, Katie."

I felt faintly sick, and altogether happy. Before he shut the library door behind me, I got the chance to whisper to Marcus, "There's something going on! He doesn't want us to know. I'm going to find out—are you with me?"

"I'm with you," he said softly, and shut the door.

chapter IV

ARTEMISIA FITZ-LEVI HAD NOT YET BEEN ALONE with her betrothed. She did not mind; it made everything they did together seem like a play, performed for an appreciative audience of ever-changing watchers. She was always well dressed and the sets were beautiful. Lord Ferris also was well dressed and knew his part to perfection. The Crescent Chancellor gallantly handed her into her carriage under the eyes of dinner or ball guests; he courteously escorted her and her mother to shops, and even to the theater, while other girls looked on in envy; he monopolized her at balls, and said very nice things about her where everyone could hear. She appeared at parties decked out in jewels that he had sent her, and he was always sure to tell her how well they became her. They were to be married in the spring, before people left town for their country estates. Sometimes Artemisia wished this engagement could go on forever.

More of her other friends had now been spoken for. They drank chocolate together, a very worldly-wise group of young ladies, casting knowing glances at the less fortunate and freely dispensing advice. Whatever their fortunes, though, Lady Artemisia knew, as did they all, that she had taken the prize. Ferris was rich and he was powerful; he was still fairly handsome, and clearly he adored her to distraction. When she was with him, she felt witty and beautiful, drunk on the same fevered wine she had known the night of the Halliday ball.

Tonight, though, she was conscious of a vague unease. Oh, the room glittered, the people glittered, and the jewels round her neck and on her fingers, all gifts of her betrothed or lent her by her mother against her inheritance. Nothing pleased her, though, not the rare sweets and drinks or the swirling patterns of costumed dancers…It seemed to her that the envious looks were fewer, that the handsome young men looked only once at her, saw her as taken and did not look again, no matter how rich her jewels or how

low-cut her gown. Lord Ferris had arrived late, pressed by business of the Council, and though he apologized handsomely and thenceforth never left her side, she found herself wishing he had never come at all.

She made him fetch and carry for her, changed her mind a dozen times about her shawl, her drinks, whether she would dance or no. It gave her less pleasure than she'd expected, knowing she could command one of the chief nobles of the city, the head of the Council of Lords. It changed nothing, really: they were still the same drinks, the same dances.

Lord Ferris kept his temper admirably. She knew he was doing it, and even that made her cross. For his part, he tried flirting with her, praising her, until finally he realized that only direct address would work. And so he took her aside and said, "My dear. Tell me what's wrong. Has someone insulted you? Or injured you in any way?"

To her own amazement, Artemisia burst into tears.

"Dear me," Ferris sighed. "It's not your mother again, is it?"

She giggled through her tears. Her handkerchief was soaked; not surprising, since it was a tiny piece of paper-thin fabric surrounded by waves of useless lace. Lord Ferris handed her his: a reasonable linen square, lightly scented with something agreeable, some fine, expensive scent twined with something else she could not name. She held it to her nose, praying it was not getting too red. He reached a hand up to hers, as if he would take the kerchief from her, then he touched the tip of her nose, instead. The tip of her nose, and then her ear.

"It's the waiting, isn't it?" he murmured. "It's hard on your nerves. I had thought best to give you time to enjoy your Season and enjoy lording it over the other girls…but there is too much of a good thing. Perhaps we might move up the date?"

His breath was warm on her face. The other scent on the handkerchief was Lord Ferris himself. He was so close that she could see the pinpricks of beard that made up the shadow of his cheek.

"What say you, pretty lady? Shall we be married right away?"

"No!" she cried, but it came out a whimper. "No, I cannot—"

"Nerves," he breathed, "that's all. All this fuss…"

She drew a deep breath and exclaimed passionately, "I wish I were not getting married at all!"

Her father would have laughed, her mother *tut-tutted*, but her intended did neither of those things. She felt the chill as he backed away. "No? Be careful

what you say, my dear. It is certainly within your power to break off the engagement if you choose."

"I—" The wet handkerchief was tight in her hand.

"But if you so choose, you must give good reasons. Neither of us wants to look like a fool."

"I don't—I didn't—"

He smiled at her, the fond lover once again. "Of course you didn't. Nerves. It will all be over soon."

She sniffled into the kerchief. Of course he was right. She didn't know where she was these days, with everything changing so.

"I'll find a maid to help you wash your face."

"Don't let Mama know—"

"Certainly not. This is between the two of us." But secretly he resolved to give her fewer gifts and more attention.

THE DUKE NEVER CAME TO WATCH ME PRACTICE, and as a rule, Marcus didn't either. He wasn't interested in swordsmen. When he showed up in the middle of one of my lessons, I knew it had to be important. Master Drake and I were running through a complicated sequence of attacks and counters that had defeated me twice already—like the worst kind of patterned country dance, where if you fall out of step you have everyone piled up on top of you—and I hated to stop just when I felt I was getting the flow of it set in my bones. Besides, I wanted my friend to see me carry off something really hard, so I just edged my back closer to Marcus and asked, "What?"

"Our man's back," he muttered. "Headed out the West door."

"Go follow him!"

"Can't. I'm waiting on Tremontaine. Just came to tell you—"

"Can't, now! Dammit, Marcus, you made me miss my stroke!"

My swordmaster laughed. "Avoid distracting onlookers. Very important, Lady K. First rule of dueling. No, no, keep going, don't stop. That's it, come at me in four, from the passe, and…*now!* Good, very good…"

I picked up the rhythm again, and moved across the room after Phillip Drake, my concentration suddenly perfect with Marcus watching. I wasn't even counting under my breath. It was as if I had become the sword and knew just what to do without thinking. I finished triumphantly, my point at Master

Drake's chest. Both of us were breathing heavily. I heard Marcus give a low *whew!* of approval. He said, "I didn't know you could do that."

I felt very much like Fabian at that moment. "There's a lot," I said, just for the pleasure of saying it, "you don't know about me."

Master Drake rapped on my blade. "Enough," he said. "Remember the rule: in any given fight, the weaker sword can win through luck or sheer accident. Let's do it once more, to prove it wasn't accident."

It certainly wasn't that, but it took me three more trials before I fell back into the unthinking rhythms of the match. By the time I emerged from practice, dripping and happy, I had forgotten all about the mysterious nobleman, and he was long gone.

A YOUNG GIRL ABOUT TO MAKE A GOOD MARRIAGE is at the center of her world, and may perhaps be forgiven for thinking she is more important than she actually is, or wiser. Since crossing her often leads to a spasm of pre-bridal nerves, older relatives may choose to indulge her until the wedding. Relatives closer to her own age, however, are less inclined to make allowances. Already Artemisia's brother Robert had thrown a shoe at her. Her cousin Lucius Perry, who had dropped by to find Robert gone, soon wished he hadn't.

"Lucius, where *were* you last night? I particularly wanted you for my little supper party, to sit next to Lydia's cousin Harriett who is just in from the country and knows no one yet."

"How delightful for me." Lucius yawned. "I sent a note; something came up."

"I don't believe you. You're always late these days, or tired, or missing. Are you up to something?"

"If I were," he said, "do you think I'd tell you?"

There was an edge to his voice she wasn't accustomed to. "Now, now." She cocked her head to one side in a charming and feminine fashion. "I think I know what the problem is. You need to settle down, that's all. Find a nice young lady who will care for you and all will be well."

He snorted rudely. "Someone like Lady Lydia's country cousin? You must not think much of her, to want to fob her off on the younger son of a younger son with no money and no prospects."

"My dear," she said gravely, "do you think that is all that marriage is about?"

"And it's not as if the Perrys are depending on me to carry on the name. Both sides of my family breed like rabbits already—a fact surely not lost on your prospective bridegroom."

"Lucius Perry! How can you say such things? Rabbits, indeed. Marriage is a sacred bond of two loving hearts."

He looked hard at her. "Oh, it is, is it? And do you love Lord Ferris?"

"I—well, I don't know yet. I hardly know him, do I? But he admires me to distraction. I admire him, too, of course."

"You hardly know him."

"That will change. I feel sure we will be blissful together. Oh, Lucius, you must not be hard on yourself. I feel certain that the right woman—"

He gritted his teeth. "Artemisia. Come back in a year and lecture me on the joys of the married state. Right now, stop preaching about things you know nothing about."

"And what is that supposed to mean, pray?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

"No, Lucius, I want to know what you mean."

"Nothing. I'm sure your parents have taken every precaution to ensure that your bridegroom is all he should be. Your dowry's substantial, everyone knows it, and the lawyers will have drawn up an excellent contract. As long as you produce a son for him quickly, Lord Ferris should never give you a moment's unease."

Artemisia gasped in shock. "That is vulgar talk, Lucius Perry," she managed to say. "If you mean to imply that Lord Ferris is—is *buying* me, somehow—"

He shook his head and turned away. "Nothing. I'm not implying anything. I'm sorry, Mia; I—I lost a bet earlier; something I can't afford to lose, and I'm out of sorts, that's all. I'll try to be more enthusiastic."

Lucius Perry never spoke about himself if he could help it. Even a month ago she would have accepted the peace offering for what it was. But he had unnerved her, and she attacked. "You have no right to walk in here and criticize Lord Ferris!" she shrilled. "He is the Crescent Chancellor. Everyone approves of him! He's an important man! Who are you, anyway? A nobody—you said so yourself."

"Right." He stood up. "Fine. I'm nobody, he's everything, and it's nothing to me whether you go into this marriage with your eyes open or squinnied tight shut."

Artemisia lifted her chin. "What are you babbling about, Lucius?"

"You don't know him very well, that's all. Ask him, sometime, about the balls and parties you're not invited to."

She raised her chin even higher. "There are no balls I'm not invited to."

"Yes, there are. Ask him."

"All right, then, I will."

He saw the haughty terror on her face, and thought of another woman he knew who had been this young, once, and faced the same choices with even less to go on. "No, don't," he said gently. "Look, I spoke out of turn, and I'm sorry. I should not have said anything."

"No, you should not."

"But, coz—" He took her hand in his; not the light touch of the ballroom, but tight and earnest. "Artemisia. You do understand, don't you? The difference between a man's world and a woman's world?"

Tears trembled in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. There are parts of a man's life—any man's life—that you're expected to ignore. Men have secrets, and it's best to let them keep them."

"Do you have secrets, Lucius?"

"Oh, many," he said. "If you were my wife, it would be particularly important that you knew nothing about them, or pretended, anyway. But we get along, don't we? I'm sure Lord Ferris is no better or worse than any other man you could have chosen. I'm sure he'll make a fine husband."

"I know he will." She dabbed her eye before a tear could fall. "Lucius," she said in a small voice, "you mustn't bet or gamble again if losing makes you so unkind. Promise me you won't."

He kissed her hand, and patted her head, but promised nothing.

chapter V

ONE DAY MY UNCLE SAID TO ME, "SABINA IS planning a Rogues' Ball. I think you should come. It will be instructive."

Wouldn't you know it? My first real city ball, and it was something roguish. Still, "Shall I wear a ballgown?" I asked.

"Not for this."

The last thing on earth I wanted was to make my city debut dressed like a boy. "Can I go masked?"

"You won't need to go masked. No one you know will be there. No one, that is, that you could admit to knowing to the sort of people you would go masked against. It is, after all, a Rogues' Ball." He flicked the invitation's stiff paper between his long fingers, then glanced at it again more closely: "Or, *Rouges'* Ball, as she's put it. If the woman can't spell—and believe me, she can't—she should get someone else to do her writing for her. She's invited half of Riverside, and everyone on the Hill who still finds her amusing. I wouldn't miss it for anything. We have a bet on how long it will take a fight to start. Dress for action, and don't carry a purse with any money: I can guarantee those will be the first to go, with all the cutpurses in attendance."

I knew who Sabina was by now: a professional mistress. She seemed to know my uncle well. She sent him chatty letters from her house in the Old City, which he sometimes read aloud to me and Marcus.

Sabina claimed always to be bored, bored, bored—bored by the lovers, bored by the duels, bored by the gold and the silk. But she kept at it nonetheless; the letters were full of her conquests and extravagances. I confess I was shocked by them: what she paid for a bracelet would have put a new roof on my mother's house; what she paid for bed-hangings would have bought the woman a small farm. It seemed to me that if only Sabina could be bothered to put some aside, she could retire very nicely from the conquests and find something that did not bore her.

Now she was hiring a guildhall to have room for all her inviteds, along with the inevitable drop-ins. The duke said to me, "Come armed."

There was no question in my mind but that I would take my master's sword. For form's sake I consulted with Phillip Drake, and to my surprise he was against it. "Old-fashioned," he said. "Look at the hilt."

"It's perfectly balanced."

"I'm not saying it's not a good sword; nice, flexible steel and all, but plain, lady, plain." He smiled. "I think we could persuade the duke to part with some funds to make a good showing at your first ball."

I shook my head, though I was tempted for a moment. "There's my New Year's knife for pretty. Although…a new scabbard would be nice. I don't think anyone would notice the hilt," I wheedled, "if it were tucked in a green leather scabbard worked with gold and scarlet, do you?"

Phillip Drake said, "I'll tell you what: you break my guard three times with the new double-pass I taught you, and I'll see to it you get any scabbard you like."

In any given fight, the weaker sword can prevail through sheer accident. But not in a drill, not three times in a row. I did it, though, and got my scabbard. So that was all right.

THE NEXT TIME THEY MET, AT A CARD PARTY, LORD Ferris was determined to let Lady Artemisia feel her consequence.

"You will be pleased to know," he said, "that half the young men of the town aren't speaking to me, because I have carried off the jewel that might have been in one of their caps."

Knowing her friends were looking, Artemisia could not resist tapping the Chancellor's arm with her fan.

"Really, sir?" she said frostily. "Then how is it that you find yourself invited to so many *fascinating* parties without me?"

He said, "No party is fascinating without you, sweet. And, as you well know, no one would dare to invite me anywhere without my intended."

Artemisia felt herself blushing. At first she was inclined to mind, but then she remembered that to see a blushing woman in a courting couple was expected. She raised her fan to her face to be sure that it was seen.

"I hear," she murmured behind it, "there is a ball to which I have not been invited."

"Really?" the Crescent Chancellor drawled. "Then I expect that I have not been, either."

"Oh, but I think you have, sir. Or what is that letter in your pocket, which you were not eager to let me see?"

And, indeed, the Crescent Chancellor's ringed hand flew to his inner pocket, but only for a moment. "Oh, that. Do you think it is from some woman?" he said loudly. "God love the puss, she's jealous already." He looked around the table for confirmation; the men guffawed, and Artemisia blushed in truth.

But she got it out of him in the end, when they were nearly alone, with her maid a discreet distance away. It was a ball, a ball comprised of rogues, the invitation said, but a ball nonetheless, and was she not an ornament at any ball? Her star shone too brightly for such low company—very well, then, she would cover it with a mask. She'd heard of married ladies who went to such places for a lark, suitably disguised, and were she and my lord not to be married so soon as made no never mind? As for rough company, well, it was soon to be his life's job to protect her, and what better place to test it than at a roguish ball? Ferris laughed at that, and allowed that if he could not protect her, no one could. But this would require more discretion than he feared she was mistress of, to quit the house without even her maid's knowledge. And what would her parents think of him if they found out?

Pooh, she said, her parents thought he'd hung the moon. If he wouldn't take her, she'd find another who would. There's Terence Monteith, quite mad for her, everyone knew he'd been drooping like a willow ever since she'd put on Ferris's engagement jewel…or her cousin Lucius Perry, he'd do anything for her.

Well, said His Lordship, we can't have you imposing on discarded lovers or worse yet, relatives. I see it is my duty to escort you safely there and back, for one last little girlish adventure…If she could contrive to be at her own garden gate when the clock struck nine that night, he would be waiting, cloak in hand.

When he left, Artemisia was breathless with excitement. Such a victory, to bend such a man to her will! She would not mind being married to him at all, if this was a taste of things to come.

ON THE NIGHT OF THE ROGUES' BALL, BETTY LAID out my nicest suit, the blue shot with crimson, and a new shirt with ruffles and a little gold edging, and low boots neatly cuffed. Just because I had no ballgown, I need not go looking like the dog's offal! I was going to the ball, and I was going as the Mad Duke's niece who studied the swordsman's art and wore a swordsman's clothes. What was the point of trying to hide it? Sooner or later it would all come out. It might as well be now. And if I found a mask to wear, he would only tear it off. I did have my new scabbard, though.

Marcus was delighted. He had retired to his room with a book of essays and a bowl of apples, with instructions to me to enjoy myself because he hated these things and not to let the duke do anything really stupid.

I waited in the front hall for some time, trying not to fidget with my sword. Nothing looks stupider than a swordsman who can't keep his hand off his tool, the master had said, and although Phillip Drake had laughed uproariously when I repeated that to him, I planned to stand by it. Finally I gave up and went and knocked on the door of the duke's chamber. Although the sun was nearly setting, the world bathed in its last colors, my uncle's rooms were shadowy and candlelit, the heavy curtains drawn. He still sat before the glass, his long hair falling all about him, sleek and new-brushed. His eyes looked very large, their color bright, gazing into the glass in which he saw me behind him. There was something about him of the enchanted prince, in the pallor of his skin or the brightness of his eyes, the surprising fineness of his hair and the etched bones of his face. He wore only plain black linen, over a very white shirt whose edges reported crisply at neck and wrists.

"Nothing too gaudy," he said to me in the mirror, "for a Rogues' Ball." But his right hand dazzled with rings. His valet combed the hair back from the duke's face and bound it with a velvet ribbon.

My uncle rose, and looked down at my head, and further down to my toes. He nodded; I was all right. "Stay close to me," he said. He wore not even a dagger. The gold rings, I supposed, were his weapon. And the plain black linen was exquisitely tailored; when he turned, I saw all the tiny folds and tucks stitched up and down the front.

He stumbled into a stool, and flung his hand out to the bedpost for support, and steadied himself there. "Stay close to me," he said again. "Things aren't quite where they should be."

"My lord," said his valet, "do you wish a draught of something steadying?"

"No," said the duke; "what for?"

I followed him down the stairs, where he was wrapped in a heavy cloak. At the door, a palanquin was waiting. He got through the curtains and into his seat very slowly, and lay back with his eyes closed. "Is it summer?" he said. "It's very warm."

I didn't answer; he wasn't listening to me anyway. When we were over the old bridge, a carriage attended. It took us slowly along the river. Now I could see all the other people going our way, mostly on foot—Riversiders, all decked out in their tasteless best, like painted poles at a Spring fair. Some impudent rascal rapped at the side of our door, demanding a lift—our footman beat him off, but the duke put a restraining hand on my arm, although I hadn't moved but to look. "Easy," he said. "Not yet."

The guildhall was so brightly lit inside that from the outside its tall windows shone like beaten gold. I was not the duke's only guard; other of our men had ridden outside the carriage, and it took the entire escort to clear a path to the guildhall steps. But they left us at the door. The duke put a hand on my shoulder, balancing. A huge footman in a livery all of ribbons came forward. He looked at my uncle. My uncle looked at him. Clearly something was supposed to be happening but wasn't. I wondered just how awful things would get if the footman tried to throw us out.

"We were invited," I said nervously, but nobody even looked at me.

My uncle spoke, finally, to the footman. "What a getup. You look," he said slowly but clearly, "like a booth at a fair."

"Ah," said the footman. "You've got that right. Shall I announce you, sir?"

"Why bother? Everyone knows who I am."

And so we entered the Rogues' Ball.

I recognized Sabina only because I didn't think our hostess would allow any other woman at her ball to be reclining in a nest of red velvet at the heart of a huge golden shell. Anyone, I suppose, was free to wear pink gauze and a necklace of the biggest pearls I'd ever seen. The shell was on a platform at the center of the room; all the activity swirled around her. The duke was staring hard at it and blinking. She caught sight of us and called "Alec!" and waved a napkin in our direction. As we drew nearer she shrieked, "Black! You wore *black* to my party!"

"Get me a drink," my uncle muttered, but he wouldn't let go of my shoulder.

By now, of course, everyone was staring at us. "Is *this* your new *boyfriend*?" Sabina demanded. We were now at the foot of the shell. It was raised above the throng, supported by carved horses with fishes' tails rising from the waves. It reminded me a lot of a serving platter for a banquet table, and I'm not sure she didn't mean it to.

"No, dear," he replied; "this is one you'd find very hard to steal from me. Unless you *like* unnatural blondes?" he asked me; but, not waiting for an answer, told her, "This one *guards* my body, instead of trying to rob it of my vital fluids."

Sabina threw back her head. She did have a glorious neck. "Brilliant. We all wondered when you were going to think of that. Well, then, I won't worry about your getting snuffed at my party. You're so considerate, you plan for everything."

"Shove over," he told her; "I want to sit down."

The pink gauze shifted in our direction. "No. You'll ruin my effect."

"Shove over, I said; you've got the best view."

"I will not."

She was getting mad, and I wasn't Marcus. But I tried. "My lord duke," I said, "don't you want to go see who's here?"

"Oh, good god," said Sabina. "This isn't a boy at all. It's the baby chick poor Ginnie was telling me about. Send her home, Alec, what's wrong with you?"

"I can fight," I said staunchly, to my surprise.

"Well," she replied, "keep your uncle out of trouble, or you're going to have to."

"I am staying out of trouble." He arranged himself on the steps to the shell. "How's that? And don't say you won't get a huge bang out of having the Duke Tremontaine sitting tamely at your feet. People will talk for days."

"No, no, no!" She smacked him with her fan. "Not only are you ruining the effect, but people always *want* things from you. I am not having my lovely seashell turned into a queuing for petitions for better drains on Tulliver Street."

"I'll stand guard," I said. It seemed like the safest place to be.

"I'm sure you will, angel," she purred, "but I want you to have a good time. Both of you. Alec, dearest darling, do go enjoy yourself and pick up some pretty man, and then you can tell me all about it tomorrow. I'll let you be the very first one to call on me, I promise, and we'll thrash the whole thing out

together first thing. Will you do that for me? Please? Oh my goodness, who's this dashing blade?" This last was addressed, not to us, but to a masked young man in very tight breeches and an open collar. He was awfully good-looking, and he was leaning over us to kiss her hand.

"Oh god," my uncle groaned, "dinner is served. Get me out of here."

I took his cold hand, and led him into the throng.

LADY ARTEMISIA FITZ-LEVI WAS AFRAID THAT HER mask was slipping. Nervously she tugged at the ribbons that held it in back. If only she hadn't had to sneak out without her maid's help; Dorrie would have been able to pin it more tightly into her hair. Unlike every other party she'd ever been to, here there was no room to retire to with ladies' maids standing by to mend tears and turn up stray locks of hair. She was on her own. "Don't worry," her escort breathed in her ear, "they'll all think you are my ladybird, isn't that the point? Put your head up, dearest, and laugh. Look like you're having a good time, or they'll know you're not."

"But I'm afraid it will come loose—"

"My dear." Her intended ran his finger carefully along the place where the bottom of the mask ended and her cheek began. She felt a chill at the base of her spine: excitement, or fear, or that thing the older girls talked about? "If I see any sign of it coming loose, I will be the first to help you hide your face. Do you think I want the world to know my wife was at this affair? No, my little madcap puss," and his arm was around her back now, holding her to him, his hand cradling her hip through the heavy layers of her skirt, "this will just be our little secret, our first adventure together. Isn't that what you wanted?" and she had to say, "Yes, of course it is."

The room was aswirl with people. It was like being in a pool of water, in a river that moved against her. Someone knocked into her and Artemisia gasped reflexively, "Oh! Excuse me!"

But her escort squeezed her waist and chuckled, "That's no way to go about it. Not here, not with these types. The next time that happens, you jab out with your elbow and say, 'Watch it, jackass!'"

She giggled nervously. "I can't!"

"Yes you can…try it." Without warning, he swung her around so she ran into a short man whose hands were full of pie. "Watch it, sister!" the man

sputtered through a mouthful of pie, and she said, "Watch it, yourself," and though she spoiled the effect by giggling, he told her she had done well.

A BAND STRUCK UP IN ONE CORNER OF THE ROOM. It was the kind of music you could hear in any Riverside tavern, fiddles and ratchety pipes and drums, and everyone loved it. The Riversiders and University students knew the tunes and the steps that went with them and threw themselves into the dance, right at home. The nobles, some dressed in rags and some in ball regalia, but all easily distinguished by their cleanliness, started casting about for likely looking girls to dance with. I was glad my clothes ensured that no one could take me for one. I passed behind, the dark duke's bright shadow, as he drifted looking for amusement.

His eye was caught by a group of men dressed in brightly fluttering tatters. They had braided ribbons into their hair, twined them through the careful rents in their shirts and sleeves and breeches. Some had tied in little bells; you couldn't hear them above the noise, but they looked nice.

"What ho!" one of them cried, roguishly, I guess, to the crowd. "We are the Companions of the King! Come join us in our devilish revelry!" They seemed to be trying to arrange people into a pyramid against the wall behind them. A red-haired man had a food-stained tablecloth laid out on the floor and was drawing on it with a burnt stick.

The duke moved towards them as if their colors were flame on a cold night. One spotted us and shouted, "Oh, joy! It's darkest Night—"

"Or Nightmare," said the redhead, "allied with Temptation. Just what we need to complete the tableau. Do join us, please, and we'll make you immortal."

"I am already immortal," the duke said, a little thickly. "Have you discovered a new method?"

"Art, sir, art is the medium! As it ever was. Art renders immortality through the medium of allegory. Twin art with morality, and there is nothing to offend anyone, yet something for all tastes."

We looked up at the artists' tableau. It was a complicated twist of people arranged reaching for fruit, for wine, or for each other. "It doesn't look very moral to me," my uncle said.

"Exactly."

"What my friend means, severe and beautiful one, is that in the interest of revealing virtue, we mask it in vice."

"Didn't Placid say that?" asked the other.

"No, I said it," snapped the red-haired artist. "It is a grand concept. A masked ball of virtue, the obverse of roguery, disguised as the very thing it seeks to cast down."

The duke actually smiled. "Very apt." He gestured to the pyramid. "And this represents…?"

"Man's heedless quest for Pleasure, of appetites temporal and carnal. See how in their striving each man treads upon the other? And how the Pleasures reach out mindlessly to tempt us?"

I certainly did. One of the Pleasures, a man all tucked up behind another one, untwisted his arm, encased in peacock blue silk, to wave it languidly at the duke. I had seen his sleek head before, and this time I knew where.

It was Artemisia's friend, and the Mad Duke's as well. I was dying to say something clever to my uncle about that particular beauty being one of the pleasures he'd already enjoyed—but if I hoped to find out more about the mysterious young man who visited nice young girls on the Hill and also worked at Glinley's, I would have to be chary. I would discover his name tonight; that would be my quest, and if I was very lucky, my uncle would not know of it.

"So in the interest of illuminating virtue," the artist was saying, "it is possible, indeed necessary, to show vice in all its manifestations. It will be a tremendous crowd-pleaser."

"Right," said the duke. "Well then, get out your sketchbooks and get started, because I want to be at the top, and I probably won't last long."

As he handed me his empty glass, I recalled my duty. "Oh, no. I really don't think you should—"

"You are my swordsman, not my governess," the duke said sternly. "If someone attacks me with anything sharp and pointed, you kill them. Otherwise, leave me alone."

There was no use arguing with him. If he broke his leg, someone could probably set it.

The duke set one finely shod foot on the thigh of a crouching earth spirit and began his ascent. I'd climbed some trees in my time, and clearly so had he. But the trees didn't usually shudder and giggle underfoot. The red-haired artist wasn't really helping, rushing in and patting people who were falling out

of pose back into place. He nearly got kicked in the teeth by a ticklish Temperance. A couple of the others began sketching madly. It looked like roiling clouds of form all over their paper, not like people at all, but I saw they were drawing a sort of map of the scene. I'd never seen anything like it, and I was so fascinated that I missed the downfall of the allegory. I heard my uncle shout, "*You!* You—" and then the voices became indecipherable, and it was all a mess of arms and legs and skirts and hair and ribbons and shrieks and laughter.

The duke crawled out from underneath the heaving throng. He pointed into it. "Kill him," he said. "He bit me."

"I don't think I—"

"My lord, I beg your pardon." A bright head with rosy cheeks emerged from the sprawl. "I mistook you for a most delicious fruit."

"An easy mistake for anyone to make," the duke said smoothly. "Do I know you?"

I knew him. It was the horrible Alcuin.

ARTEMISIA HAD A STITCH IN HER SIDE. SHE REACHED across the dancers for Lord Ferris, but his hand seemed to slip away from hers as if pulled by the awful music, the straining strings. A stranger with garlic breath had his arm around her waist, and she was close to tears. The dance was not one she knew. There were no steps, it was just leaping back and forth in time to the music, with your partner swinging you this way and that and handing you off to someone else at a signal, but she did not know what it was. All sorts of men had had their hands all over her, and it was too much, really too much, but every time Lord Ferris came in view he smiled brightly at her and said, "Enjoying yourself, sweetheart?" It was all that kept her from tearing herself out of the crowds and running for home…The garlic went away and she smelt a familiar scent, looked up and realized it was Lord Ferris with his arms around her, and she leaned into his chest and whimpered up at him, "I'm thirsty."

"Poor kitten," he said. "Of course you are. What a treat you were there, a jewel ornamenting the arms of some of the roughest men in town." He was holding her as close as some of them had, closer than he had ever held her before. But at least they were off the dance floor, headed for a quiet corner

away from the worst of the brawl. “What shall I feed you now, my sweet pet, wine? Or maybe beer, in the spirit of the evening.”

“Water,” she said, “or a fruit coolant.”

But he went on as if she had not spoken, “I’m not sure she’s serving wine tonight; they’d guzzle it like rough ale, these types, and there would be chaos. But don’t worry; I’ve brought this.” He drew a flask from his jacket, and raised it to his lips. When he lowered it, a little moisture clung to them. “Taste?” he whispered.

“What?” Artemisia was baffled.

He leaned his face down to hers, so that his wet lips were nearly touching hers. “Put out your tongue,” he said, “and taste.”

No one knew where she was. No one here would care what he asked her to do. They were in a corner where no one could see them. Closing her eyes, she slowly put out her tongue and tasted burning brandy and the skin of his lips.

“Ah!” His sudden hot breath shot right into her lungs; she gasped and tried to pull back, but his arms were tight around her.

“Ah,” he said again, and his mouth was all over her, her lips, her chin, her ears, her neck, her chest where the gown was cut as low as she had dared.

“My wicked girl,” he said, “how I adore you.” Artemisia knew she should be pleased, but she was frightened. His hands were everywhere, too, rumpling her skirts, pushing at her bodice, pinning back her hands while he kissed her.

“Please,” she breathed, “I—”

“Oh, do you?” he growled. “Do you? Of course you do, of course you do, so do I—”

“No!”

She said it, she heard herself say it, but he did not seem to. He did not seem to hear anything except his own hot breath, which was terribly loud in her ear while he did things to her skirts until there was nothing at all between him and her, really nothing whatsoever, and although she wailed in distress it only seemed to make him hotter and he forced her up against the wall and rammed himself into her over and over and she had to stop thinking because there was nothing else to do until he let out a revolting noise and draped himself over her all sweaty and said, “Couldn’t wait, could you?”

She was shivering as if her whole body would shake to pieces.

“My dearest love,” he said, and pulled a lock of hair back from her cheek, “are you cold?”

"Please," she said, "I want to go home."

"Come home with me," he murmured. "We've the whole night ahead of us."

He wrapped his arms tight round her, and she tasted sick in the back of her throat. She swallowed hard and tried to match his tone, but her voice came out all squeaky. "How can you say that? How can you say that to me?"

"But why not, sweetheart?" Lord Ferris murmured in her hair.

"How dare you suggest that I—that I—"

"That you are the sort of young lady who would go off unchaperoned with a man to a strange place with no protection? That you'd allow him liberties with you there?" Something caught in her throat and she made a kind of barking noise. "Now, now," he said, "don't cry. Can't you see I love you all the better for it, you wanton little sweet sweet slut?"

She was sobbing so hard she could scarcely breathe, and she heard herself making awful retching noises. She reached out blindly for someone, for something, but only his hands were there to catch hers, and "Oh, come on," he said; "it's not that bad. Stop howling like a kitchen maid. Maybe I was a little quick for your first time, but can you blame me? Overcome as I was by the rapture of your beauty—I've been overcome for weeks, now, and you damn well know it, you hot little piece. You lead me on, and then expect me to control myself? There, there, stop crying; I promise I'll be good and slow and patient when we're married. You'll like it fine, you'll see."

"Married?" she gasped. "Married? To *you*?"

As she spoke the words, she realized what it meant. Married to Lord Ferris. There would be all the gowns and the jewels, the wedding ceremony and the guests and the banquet, and then she would go home with him to his house, and she would belong to him forever and he could do this to her whenever he liked, without asking. That was what it meant.

"Well, yes, married to me," he said reasonably, and chuckled. "Were you thinking of doing this, and then marrying someone else? That's not how it works, you sweet little slut, and you know it."

Artemisia tried to catch her breath—once, twice, and she found the air she needed to say, "Never. I will never marry you."

"Oh, yes, you will," he said comfortably. "Think of it this way: at least we know now we'll suit between the sheets. Not bad, that. Now pull yourself together; you're a bit of a mess. I'll find you something nice to drink, and when I come back we'll have a little dance, shall we?" She shook her head in

protest. "Don't worry," he said, "I won't make you dance with any of those buffoons. I admit I enjoyed seeing them holding you there—but you're mine now, and I won't let you out of my hands ever again."

MY UNCLE LOOKED ALCUIN UP AND DOWN. "OH. You. I thought I got rid of you ages ago. What were you doing lurking in allegories biting me?"

"Old habits die hard?" suggested the beautiful Alcuin.

"It is a habit," the duke said, "that I would endeavor to correct if I were you."

"Oh, really?" Alcuin lowered his eyelids and looked up through long lashes. "And are you going to help correct me?"

As if entranced, the duke slowly moved one hand toward the handsome man's face—but at the last moment, Alcuin turned his face away. "Leave me alone," he said sharply. "You had your chance."

I didn't like this. Other people were getting interested. I looked around for the sleek man from Glinley's, but he had slipped away from the crowd. The artists may not have known who my uncle was, but various Riversiders did, and I heard the whispering behind us: *Tremontaine…*

My uncle looked his former lover in the eye. "You shoe-scraping," he said. "You worthless piece of trash."

Alcuin's face turned pale, and then dark. "Not so worthless," he said. "I've got something you don't have. Something I happen to know you want."

He raised his chin and made a little moue with his rosy lips. A well-built dark-haired man came to his side, a sword slung low at his hips.

"Is someone," the swordsman said to his friend, "offering you trouble?"

The duke's face stiffened with distaste. Ignoring the swordsman, he said to Alcuin, "You can't challenge me, you monkey's turd. Only a noble can do that, and you're not exactly noble; the Court of Honor would never hear your case. A civil court would sentence you to death, even if you won."

"No one would dream of challenging you, sir." Alcuin did not budge. "But my swordsman has every right to challenge your…your *thing*."

My hand was on my sword. I heard the duke say, "It appears, Lady Katherine, that my old sweetheart here would like some of our blood."

I didn't care. I was more than ready for him.

And I did not like being called a *thing*.

Alcuin's swordsman was much bigger than I was, and much stronger, too. He looked me up and down. "Do you really think this is even worth it?"

"Just do it," Alcuin told him through gritted teeth.

"But—no offense, dear—but it's a *girl*, right?" Like Alcuin, he wasn't very bright.

"I don't care if it's a spotted baboon! She's got a sword, and she offends me. So if you want to get any tonight, or ever again for that matter, you'll draw your steel right now and teach her some respect!"

"She is a noble," the duke drawled, "and you are not. The privilege of the sword extends only to—"

"I accept the challenge," I said quickly. "On my own behalf, sword to sword, I accept."

"Well, then," my uncle said.

I looked around at the considerable crowd. "Where do we—"

"Fall back." The duke and some others started clearing people back to form a circle. I had the sudden fierce wish that Marcus could be there, not to help me, but to see me doing it for real at last.

"Five on the girl." The betting had begun. "Twenty on Rippington." So that was his name. What a stupid name. Rippington.

Rippington and I faced each other across the circle. "Oh, lord," he said, and sighed. As the challenger, he had the right to begin the match, but as the challenged, I could call the terms.

"First blood," I said. My hand was closed around the pommel of the master's sword. I was glad I had not let Phillip Drake talk me out of bringing it tonight. I thought, Well, at least *you've* done this before. I breathed deep, felt the balance in my feet. Balance is everything.

"Ready?" he asked formally.

I nodded. He drew, and I drew, and we stood at guard. Then Rippington advanced and tapped my blade gently. I didn't move. Don't waste your moves, and don't show your strengths until you have to. Make them wait, and make them guess, and make them show you theirs.

Rippington fought like a training lesson. He pulled back and executed a perfect lunge, hoping to get it over with quickly, I guess, but I saw it coming a mile away and stepped gently aside to let him pass, which he did, nearly falling on his face.

"Dammit!" he said, and I heard, "Twenty on the girl."

I turned around and attacked him in a high line to see if he'd go for it, and of course he did, opening his entire front for just long enough for me to have killed him if I had wanted to. He parried this time, and I replied a bit showoffishly with a fancy riposte, just to see if he'd follow the move. God, he was slow! I realized later he must have been drinking to be so slow and precise; he fenced as if he was doing lessons, as if he was always trying to be sure his feet were in exactly the right position. Wine is enemy to sword. But at the time, I thought that he was making fun of me, refusing to take me seriously, so I got a little flashy and began speeding things up.

Mistake. Drunk or not, his sword was still perfectly long and deathly sharp, and when we closed at close quarters I realized that he could wrench the blade from my hand simply by applying enough force. Spooked, I backed off, nearly crashing into the ring of onlookers. There were jeers; I tried not to hear them, but I knew what they meant. I looked like a fool, and I felt like one. This was not a lesson. Rippington's blade was not tipped, and he would not pull back if he came too close. When he lunged, I felt the steel sweep past my face, and knew it *was* steel. He hadn't been making an effort because he thought I wasn't worth it. Now he wasn't so nice. Now he was working harder, testing me, trying to draw me out. I kept my moves small, trying to give little away, but it was hard not to bring out my fiercest defensive moves. Save them, a voice inside me said. Save them for when you need them. Watch him and see what he does.

I watched, and I responded. The crowd was quieter now. This was the way it was supposed to be, a conversation between equals, an argument of steel. I wasn't going to die. The worst that I could do was lose the bout, but I wasn't going to lose if I could help it. Because at last I found the move that my opponent loved best: a nice, flashy double-riposte. I found it, and I found that I could make him do it every time. High parry, low parry, wherever I came in didn't matter, I could count on him coming back with that double-riposte. Like making a cat jump to a piece of string. It probably worked better with a taller opponent; with me he didn't have to reach quite so far as he was used to. He kept doing it out of habit, and because he looked good in the pose, but the difference between us made it just a little off-balance for him. That's the problem with having one favorite move. I enticed him into it one more time, and then I came in right where I was supposed to, in a clean line straight to the—

Straight to the heart, it would have been, and I don't know whether he could have defended himself in time, but at the last minute I realized what I was doing, and turned my wrist just a fraction so that instead the point slashed messily across his arm, tearing his shirt and the skin under it.

"Blood!" The cry went up. I fell back, gasping; I hadn't realized I was working so hard. "First blood to—what's your name, dearie?"

"Uh, Katherine," I said. "Katherine Talbert."

My uncle was gazing delightedly at me. "This," he began, "is my—"

"Shut up!" I told him. "Just shut up, don't say it, all right? Just for once."

So then he was laughing so hard the red-haired artist had to hold him up. I had a feeling the red-haired artist who loved allegory was in for an interesting night.

"Alec!" Sabina had arrived; I guess it took her a long time to get down from the seashell. "Alec, *when* did I tell you there would be *fighting* at my party?"

I looked for Rippington. Alcuin was binding up his wounds surrounded by a coterie of friends. They shot me some truly dirty looks. It had never occurred to me that not everyone loved you after you'd won a fight. It wasn't in the books. Even Richard St Vier hadn't mentioned it.

Not that people weren't all around me saying some very nice things, trying to get my attention. But I had no stomach for answering questions just then. I was thirsty, and I just wanted to be alone for a bit.

"Here, you." Someone put a cup in my hands. It was the woman I'd met my first day out in Riverside, the colorful Ginnie Vandall. I drank. Water had never tasted so good. She put her arm around my waist, and I let her lead me out of the crowd. But she wanted something from me, too. "Where is he?" she murmured low and urgent in my ear. "I know those moves. Where is he?"

I broke away from her, and ran.

I ran to the furthest corner I could find, but it was already occupied, by a dark-haired woman in a truly beautiful lavender gown, a color I cannot wear. Her back was to me, but then she turned around and I recognized Artemisia Fitz-Levi, of all people.

"Oh!" she said brightly. "It's you! Are you here, too? Are you having a good time?"

It was perfectly obvious that she'd been crying her eyes out. And her hair was a mess.

"What happened?" I asked because clearly something had, and it was not good, whatever it was.

"Oh, nothing. I'm just fine. How are you?"

Her hands were shaking. I took them in mine. They were icy cold. I said, "I'm fine. I just almost killed someone. I'm here as the duke's bodyguard, but I think you need one more."

She looked at me with terror. "Is my hair really awful?"

"A rat's nest."

Her face melted and crumpled, and she started to cry. She put her hands up over her face, as if she could hide it, and she shook her head when I tried to touch her, but I did for her what I sometimes did for my mother, and just put my arms around her until she naturally laid her head on my shoulder and clung to me, and she sobbed there for a good long while. When she got a little quieter, I disengaged enough to dig out my handkerchief and offer it to her.

"Look," I said, "can you tell me what happened? Maybe I can do something."

"You can't do anything," she sniffled. "No one can. It's all my fault and there's nothing I can do, but I'll never marry him, never!"

"Marry who?"

"Lord F-Ferris. My intended. I made him bring me here, and then he—he—"

I stepped back a pace. "A nobleman brought you here? To this? What is he, an idiot?"

"He's the Crescent Chancellor, you dolt!" Well, she was upset. "I'm supposed to marry him, but I can't, now. I can't marry anyone, never, ever. I'm ruined!" she wailed.

"Ruined how?"

She hiccupped and looked me in the eye. "Ruined. Exactly like in the books. That kind of ruined."

"And your Lord Ferris stood by and let someone—"

"No. He did it himself." I seized her sticky hand, and she gripped mine, hard. "He says I'll learn to enjoy it. But I won't. I won't. I won't marry him. I'll never let him touch me again."

I said, "Certainly not. Look, you'd better go home."

"Will you take me?" she asked piteously.

"I—I'll have to ask my uncle."

"No! You mustn't tell anyone! Above all, not him!"

"I won't tell him, I'll just…" Just what? Then I thought of something. "Look," I said, "do you remember that day I came to see you? And you were visiting with that pretty young man?"

"Pretty enough, I suppose," she sniffed. "That's my cousin Lucius. Lucius Perry."

"Your cousin! Perfect. Because he's here, Artemisia, I saw him not long ago. I'm going to go find him, and he will take you home."

She clutched my sleeve. "Oh, no! Don't leave me! Lord Ferris might come back at any moment."

"Then you must hide. Hurry, the time is short." We found her a niche outside the main hall and she huddled into it, pale in the moonlight and the shadows from the hall.

"Be strong," I said to her; "be brave, Artemisia. I'll find this Lucius, and all may yet be well."

Her eyes got a little wide, and then I watched her face change subtly. Some of the pain went out of it, to be replaced by a soft determination. "All will be well," she said, and I knew she was thinking of the same chapter I was, "with you at my side."

I turned back to the ballroom then, which was good because I was blushing. Although I'd thought about it a lot on my own, no one had ever compared me to Fabian before.

The place was a madhouse, with people dancing and kissing and who knows what. I was never going to find her cousin Lucius without some kind of a plan. *Lucius Perry, Lucius Perry*…He was a nobleman, and a Perry at that. Even I had heard of the Perrys, a large and prosperous family. No wonder the duke didn't want us to know who his visitor really was. The duke was encouraging Artemisia's cousin Lucius in a life of vice, and taking his share out of the profits, too. Maybe the duke was blackmailing young Perry. Did Tremontaine blackmail people, or did he draw the line at that? He had some strange notions about honor, did my uncle the Mad Duke.

"Out of my way, boy!" A big man in red brocade bumped into me, and I jumped about a foot. Was this Artemisia's betrothed, that evil man? I didn't know what the Crescent Chancellor looked like, but I wanted to be sure he didn't find her again tonight. Now I really wished Marcus were here. But he wasn't. That might be for the best, though. I would definitely tell him about

Lucius Perry; Perry was ours. But what had happened to Artemisia Fitz-Levi, that was something I must keep to myself.

If you were a nobleman leading a double life who had decided to attend a Rogues' Ball where half the people knew you as one sort of person, and the other as another, where would you be? Masked, I thought, if you had any sense. But had he? He had been in the allegory bare-faced. My master said that there were swordsmen who courted the dangerous opponent and the sudden move. He must be like that, her cousin Lucius.

"I'm writing a song." The voice was so close I thought it was directed at me, but the speakers were off to one side, above my head. "'The Maid with the Blade.' It will sell like mad on the street."

"Dirty or clean?"

"Oh, romantic, I think. With lots of verses; maybe I'll even run to two sides…"

It was about me, and it wasn't, but I couldn't worry about that now. I moved slowly onwards, looking.

Lucius Perry was masked, so it's a good thing I recognized his smooth dark hair, that and his sleeve, which was of an unusual cut in that glorious peacock blue. When you've mended as many clothes as I have, you sort of memorize fabrics without realizing it. He stood off to one side, leaning against the wall with a drink in his hand, watching everyone.

"Come quickly!" I said, without wasting time. "Artemisia is here, and she needs you!"

He lifted the soft velvet mask off his eyes. "Who—oh, you're the—Wait a minute. What's happened?"

I grabbed his wrist. "Just come!"

I had thought she would fall into his arms weeping, but when she saw her cousin, Artemisia simply held out her trembling hands. "Lucius," she whispered, "take me home."

"I will." But first he took off his mask, and tied it securely over her face. "Come," he said; "come with me, and don't speak a word."

He put an arm around her waist, and she leaned on him, very shaky. "Don't worry," I said encouragingly, and tried to think of something better to say. "Tonight's deed will not go unpunished."

She turned and smiled at me, and then she and Lucius Perry disappeared into the crowd.

Pinking Alcuin's bullyblade Rippington had been nothing, just swordplay and acrobatics. But at least now I knew that I could win a fight against a full-grown man. What Lord Ferris had done to my friend was unspeakable, disgusting. When she told her family, they would probably kill him. But if they didn't, I would.

chapter VI

I WOKE UP WITH KITTENS ALL OVER MY FACE. I RAISED a hand to brush them off, but they turned out not to have any legs or tails. My uncle the mad duke was sweeping swathes of velvet over me, cheerfully urging, "Get up, get up—have some tea and tell me which one you like best."

I pulled the blankets up around my neck. The swathes were attached to several large bolts of fabric, which a nervous shop assistant was holding while the duke tried them against my face. I looked around for Marcus, but he, thank god, was not there to see; only Betty stood by, patiently holding a cup of tea. I seized it from her and drank, and said, "My sword!" I had put it away dirty last night. Blick, blick, blick, as Venturus would say. I'd be ages getting the rust out.

"Never mind that," my uncle said. "Just tell me which one you like best."

"I like them all," I said, playing for time while I tried to wake up. There was a fire in the hearth, and the sun coming through the thick old windows was mid-afternoonish. I remembered coming home in the thin light of dawn, my uncle a dead weight in the sedan chair beside me. He'd had his fill of the red-haired artist and a number of other stimulants, besides. There'd been no

moving him without two hefty footmen. I'd tumbled into bed without a thought for anything other than how soft it was.

"Well, you're not having them all, just one."

"One what? You shouldn't be here," I groused. "I'm not even dressed."

"Don't be prudish. You can defend yourself perfectly well. You proved that last night. I am very, very pleased. Also relieved. I'm making you a present: a lovely velvet cloak. Made to your measure, with room to grow. Now, which do you like best?"

I clutched at the nearest velvet, and to my shame I started to cry. It was unbelievable. I had almost killed a man last night, and now I was going to have the cloak of my dreams. And my friend Artemisia had been forced in a crowded ballroom, in her beautiful lavender gown.

"IT'S NOT TO BE BORNE." LADY FITZ-LEVI PUT HER HANDS on her breast. "Really, Fitz, it is intolerable."

"Agreed." Her husband shifted his chair closer to the fire, and picked a spot of egg off his vest. "Something must be done."

"Indeed."

"I can hardly bear it."

"Terrible." Her husband shook his head in annoyance. "What on earth was she thinking of, running off like that? A young lady betrothed, and to such a place. It's a wonder she wasn't set upon by rogues of the vilest kind." His lady nodded. "Of course, Ferris had no business taking her there. A grown man like that, helping her in a schoolgirl prank. I thought he had more sense."

"It was she, my dear, who lacked sense. I'm sure she just twisted Ferris round her little finger, as she always does. She got in over her head, and now she's sorry and wants to call off the wedding. Well, I'm not having it. She'll take the consequences of her folly and make us proud in the end, and that is that."

"I saw those flowers he sent this morning; man's besotted."

"He surely must be. She's a lucky girl and doesn't even know it. Refusing her food like that. I've tried all morning, but I cannot talk sense into her."

"Well, girls have their humors. We cannot *force* her to eat."

"Do you think so?" Nervously his wife twisted her lace fichu in her ringed fingers. "They always forced *me* to eat. Boiled carrots. I hated them."

"I think she's a bit old for boiled carrots," said her husband. "But you're welcome to try."

"She's a bit old to be carrying on like a baby! Maybe boiled carrots is what she deserves."

"Why don't you make her something she particularly likes? A nice cake, or something."

"She refused her toast and chocolate; am I to treat her like an invalid? No, indeed. She must know that I am very displeased. All she will say is that she wants you to challenge Lord Ferris."

Lord Fitz-Levi snorted. "Why would I want to do that? Ruin the wedding and ruin her name at the same time? And ruin our highest ally in the Council of Lords? I'm counting on him to help Robbie to a good post this year. What a lot of fuss over nothing."

"That's what I told her. Do you know, I think we should move the wedding up? They'll have to work harder on the gown, but it will be worth it. Oh, she'll make a lovely bride!"

THE DUKE TREMONTAINE PERSONALLY SIGNED THE order for his niece's new garment, all three yards of it, silk lining and tassels and all. He signed it with a flourish, and picked up his next piece of business, ignoring the opening of the study door, since he knew perfectly well who it was.

"Are you happy now?" the Ugly Girl said. "Your niece is the talk of the town."

"How would you know?" the duke asked, amused. "You don't get out much."

She held up a cheap sheet of paper, as cheaply printed. It was a rude cartoon of a tall, thin, unhappy-looking man and a bosomy girl with a sword pointed upwards; the words underneath were: "*Oh, no! My Tool is useless, I must find a Girl to do the Work for me!*"

He took the page from her, and held it up to a candle. "Don't let her see it. And if she does, don't explain it to her."

"What about you? Don't you mind?"

The duke singed the edges of the page so that they were evenly crisped all round. "About this one more than any of the others? Why should I? I'm a popular figure. They like doing my nose." He turned it around again; the lowest letters, which named the printer and engraver, blackened away. "Alcuin's not the first of my discards to try something like this: nasty drawings, imprecations on my manhood. Horrible, isn't it?" he said cheerfully. "Do you think I should have him killed, or what?"

"You've already subjected your pretty friend to a fate worse than death, haven't you?" she said peevishly. "Let's leave it at that. What I want to know is, are you through with the girl, or just beginning?"

"I didn't know you were so fond of her," the duke said.

"I'm not. It's a theoretical question. I'm interested in the way your mind works—or doesn't work, depending."

"Do you mean: she's done her trick, now I should find some nice nobleman and marry her off? In that case, no, I'm not done with her. Besides, she's company for Marcus. He needs more friends his own age."

THE FIRST LETTER REACHED ME THE NEXT MORNING. It was addressed to the Lady Katherine at Tremontaine House, and had clearly passed through several hands, not all of them clean. The sealing wax was scented, and the loopy handwriting was in violet ink. But there were spots on the paper where tears had made the ink run, and the letters sloped downward across the page.

Dearest Friend, it read. *I am beset. I am without hope. My parents Know All, but my woe means nothing to them. They are monsters and tyrants. They want me to marry him, still. I will die, first. You understand. You are the only one who does. I will never forget your kindness to me. Do not try to visit me. I am a prisoner here. But if you can contrive to send a line or two of simple hope to me in my wretched misery, it will speak more than volumes of insincere verse from less noble souls than yours. I hope this letter finds you well. I will bribe the underhousemaid with my last year's silk stockings to bring it to you from your own—*

Stella

I stuffed it in my pocket when Marcus came in. Of course he noticed.

"From your mother?" he said.

"No. You know that's not allowed."

"I don't care." He studied his nails. "I'm your friend. I'll help you, if you like."

"I don't need help, thanks."

My friend took a step backwards. "I guess not. After that swordfight, and all. The duke's pleased, anyway. Do whatever you want; you could fill your room with apes and parrots, and he'd only ask if you wanted to feed them oranges."

"I don't want parrots," I said. He did not look happy. "Do you want to play shesh?" I asked, partly to make him feel better, and partly to distract him from the letter.

"Not really."

"Well, then…do you want to hear about my swordfight?"

"Dying to tell me, are you?"

"Well, who else am I going to tell?" I was dying to tell someone, after all. It was my first real fight, and I had won! I almost wished that Venturus were still around, so I could tell him. Marcus lacked expertise and enthusiasm, but at least he would listen. I decided to ignore his mood and continued ruefully, "Betty will only start going on about how I should have seen St Vier in his heyday or something; besides, I want to get it all clear in my head before I have to run through it for Phillip Drake so he can tell me everything I did wrong."

Marcus wasn't interested in the subtleties of my swordplay, but he was very enthusiastic about the results. He'd disliked Alcuin more than most, and utterly approved of his public humiliation at the Rogues' Ball. "You've got a real future, Katie," he concluded approvingly, "in hitting irritating people where it hurts. No wonder the duke is pleased with you."

He didn't ask again about my letter, but then, it wasn't the only one I got. Sabina actually wrote to thank me for providing such wonderful entertainment at her party, and did I want to do it again for a private event? Two people offered me jobs as a guard, and a theatre asked if I would be interested in entertaining crowds between shows. The duke's private secretary, Arthur Ghent, offered to open all my letters and take care of the crazy ones for me. But I didn't want him to see what was coming to me, because I was expecting another one soon from Artemisia.

I had written her back saying:

Stella—

To live is to hope, and while we breathe, we hope and live. (That was from the book.) *Though I serve another, I am yours to command.* (So was that; it was a line of Tyrian's, but I liked him sometimes better than Fabian. He had sense.) *Be brave, be strong, and know that you are ever in the thoughts of your faithful—*

KT

Getting it delivered to the Hill without any of my friends on the duke's staff knowing about it would be tricky. In the end, I went out on the streets of Riverside and picked the hungriest kid I could find.

"Watch it, pal," he said, and I said, "You!" because it was the one who had tried to rob me that first day in the snow. He had nerve, even if he didn't have much sense. His name was Kevin, and I gave him two coppers to carry my letter to Artemisia's maid, with the promise of five more if he came back with a ribbon to prove it had gotten there.

It was a lavender ribbon. I tied it around my wrist under my shirt, as a token not to forget.

AFTER A FEW DAYS, ARTEMISIA'S PARENTS WERE AT their wits' end.

"I am at wits' end, Fitz," his lady said to him for the third time that hour. "She's showing no sense whatsoever."

"Seems simple enough," her husband repeated. "Easy for her, really. She's already agreed once to this marriage. She just has to do it again. Simple."

"It's not as if we forced her into it, is it? We let her choose for herself, and she chose Lord F."

"Certainly she did." Lord Fitz-Levi examined his neckcloth in the mirror. It had held up remarkably well under the morning's stresses. "All this fuss over a little cuddle in the dark."

"They were, after all, betrothed."

He gave a final tug to put it in place. "She'll settle down once she's married, god love her."

But their daughter seemed to have suffered a sea change. She spoke wildly, most unlike herself. She had no wish to go out, she said, lest she encounter *him*. She refused even the most tempting food, and would not try on her

wedding dress, although it was magnificent. There was talk of a physician, or a trip to the country, and they put it about that she was down with the grippe. No one but her maid noticed the purple inkstain on her middle finger.

Gentle Friend,

Do not believe anything they say of me. Not even if you hear the wedding is going forward. If it does, it is without my consent. They say I am to blame. I do not understand how that could be. Men are supposed to protect women. And when they do insult them, their fathers and brothers are supposed to rush to their defense, not call them horrible names and laugh at their distress.

How I envy you. Your uncle may be mad, but at least he lets you fight back.

The anguished,

Stella

I replied to her at once:

Lady Stella,

I am not so gentle a friend that I am not filled with righteous wrath on your account. By no means hearken to the voices of those who say it was your fault, because it wasn't. Any more than it is my fault that I have to learn the sword and wear funny clothes. They are bigger than we are, and older and have more money and can make us do things we don't want to. Remember when we met at my uncle's ball? I thought you were so brave and elegant and daring, and you were, too. I wished I could be like you.

I have a new cloak now. It is moss green figured velvet with gold tassels and a silk lining called moth's wing. I wish you could see it.

Your family is wrong, that's all. Don't get married to him, whatever you do.

I looked at our two letters, sitting side by side. *He lets you fight back.* What would I do in her place? Well, that was the wrong question, because I would never be in her place. Thanks to the duke, no one like Lord Ferris was ever going to want to marry me. Did that mean my uncle was protecting me? If someone violated me, would he have them killed without question? I bet he

would. But did that mean he cared, or just that he was crazy and bloody-minded? How could Artemisia's parents love her and not believe her now?

Oh, it was hopeless. I wasn't Artemisia, and she wasn't me.

I liked the way Artemisia saw me as a heroic swordsman. Was St Vier heroic? He was, in his way, as much a legend as *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*. What would he say about Artemisia? He'd probably say she shouldn't have been there in the first place without knowing how to defend herself, and he was probably right. But what did he know about it? He'd always been able to defend himself. He'd probably never been to a ball in his life, and if he had, he didn't know what it was like to hope you were pretty, and that people would like your dress and ask you to dance…What did he know? What did any of them know?

Of course her father and brother were hopeless. They didn't know, either.

I did.

I picked up my pen again.

The insult is not to be borne, I wrote. *If neither father nor brother will rise to your defense, then the lot must fall to one who, however unworthy of the position, is eager to stand as your champion. Not only for your own sake, but for that of all ladies misprised. What, after all, am I doing here, anyway? To what end my skills, if not for this? I wear your ribbon, and will avenge your wrong. And woe to he who stands in my way!*

Your loving friend and staunch defender,

KT

But don't worry, I added in postscript. *I'm not telling anyone.*

I sealed it with candlewax and went looking for Kevin to deliver it. He was eager for the work. "So am I, like, your new guard or something?" he asked. "I'd make a good guard."

"You are my private messenger," I said. "It's very confidential."

"Huh?"

"Secret. Go and return within the hour, and I will have another task for you. Now, make it snappy!"

Then I went and found Arthur Ghent and asked the secretary a lot of intelligent questions about the Council of Lords and its officers: the Crescent Chancellor, the Raven and the Dragon, and all the rest. He was pleased that I was taking such an interest in government. "Would you like to visit the

Council Hall someday?" he asked. "His Grace's attendance is, ah, spotty, but I usually know when he's going to take his seat. You could accompany him, and watch it all in action."

"Thanks," I said.

But I wasn't going to wait that long. It was a bright, clear day. I dressed warmly, and strapped on my good sword and dagger, and waited for Kevin to come and take me to where the Council of Lords met across the river.

I had never crossed to the East Bank before. It was in the oldest part of the city, the part built by the old kings and queens that had ruled before the Council of Lords deposed them. Kevin didn't know anything about that; his sense of the place was based entirely on where he had or had not gotten into food or into trouble. The docks and warehouses were especially fertile grounds for these reminiscences, but as we came up upon the Old Fort and finally to Justice Place, he ran out of narrative.

He wasn't stupid, he just didn't know about anything. I decided to instruct him, since it distracted me from being nervous and might do him some good. "These are very historic buildings," I told him. "The Council Hall was once the Hall of the Kings—see those heads carved all along it? They're carvings of the old kings."

"I hate kings. We always kill the king on Harvest Night—throw him in the fire, and he burns up like this—blam!! If I saw a king, I'd kill him dead. What are you doing here, anyway? You gonna kill someone?"

"Stick around and find out. But make yourself scarce for now, so nobody sees you. I'll pay you when we get back to Riverside."

Kevin faded back into the buildings' shadows, and I was alone watching the great doors of the Council Hall remain resolutely closed. My fingers were cold. I bought some hot chestnuts from one of the vendors that scattered the plaza, and that helped some, although they turned dusty in my dry mouth. At last a bell rang, as I knew it must. Servants and secretaries started coming out the door, and then carriages began pulling up along one side of the plaza, to carry their masters home.

And there he was on the steps. It wasn't hard to recognize Lord Ferris from the secretary's description. There might be more than one tall, handsome middle-aged man with black hair streaked with silver, but there was only one with an eyepatch. Arthur Ghent had neglected to mention that his mouth was cruel. At least, I thought so. He was talking to another noble,

waiting for the carriages to come round. I took a deep breath, and walked boldly up to them.

"Lord Ferris?" I asked, and he nodded. "Um, Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris, Crescent Chancellor of the Council of Lords of this city and this land, I challenge you."

He looked down his long nose at me. "Whatever for?"

"I'm not sure you want your friend to hear."

The other man blinked and laughed. "Good lord! It's that chit of Tremontaine's! My valet told me about it. Were you at that famous ball, too, Ferris?"

"Ask your valet," Ferris retorted.

"What can you have done to offend Tremontaine this time?"

"What can one do not to offend him?" Ferris drawled. His friend laughed, but the Crescent's look on me was fierce for a moment. "Come, young lady," he said with smooth civility, "let us discuss this matter out of the cold." I followed him back up the shallow steps of the Council Hall. At his nod, the guards drew aside. Lord Ferris led me into a small room, wood-paneled like the Riverside house, with a small fire just dying in the hearth. "Now then," he said, "what is this nonsense?"

"It's not nonsense. I challenge you."

"My dear." Lord Ferris unpeeled his gloves from his hands and held them to the fire. "Please tell your uncle that this descends well below the annoying to the merely pathetic. If Tremontaine has a quarrel with me, let him say so himself, and not send a girl to do his business for him."

"It's not his quarrel. It's on behalf of someone else." Ferris tilted his head inquiringly. I did not like looking at him, knowing what he'd done. I found it hard to speak the crime out loud or say her name. "A friend of mine. You forced her. Against her will."

"You know nothing about it." But he didn't sound so smooth now.

"I know that honor has been violated. I know you did it, and that it has gone unpunished. On behalf of Artemisia Fitz-Levi, I demand satisfaction. I challenge you to combat in the place and time of your choosing, with what champion you will, until honor is washed clean with blood."

Ferris laughed, and I hated him. "The girl is not without family. She has a father. She has a brother. If honor has been violated, as you so quaintly put it, it is their business, indeed their duty, to call challenge on me."

"But it isn't their honor, sir. It's hers."

He went on as if I hadn't spoken, "And have they come after me with swordsmen? They have not. Indeed, I hope to be married soon. So you just run along."

I was so angry I wanted to cry. I swallowed my tears. "It's hers. Her honor, not theirs."

"You don't seem to understand," Lord Ferris said. "It is not the duke's business to interfere in this. Whatever strange notions he holds about women —and if your situation is an example of them, I hope you will not take it as an insult when I say that they are very strange indeed—" He lifted a hand against my interruption. "Stop just a moment and think. You're an intelligent girl. I mean you no harm. Why should I? Your uncle, the Duke Tremontaine, is a dreamer and a lunatic. His treatment of you should tell you that, if nothing else. My dear, I know you're in a difficult situation. A poor relation, he's got you where he wants you, and no fault of yours…" I let the insults go by. A good swordsman doesn't pay attention to words in a fight. Lord Ferris turned his head to look me full in the face with his one good eye. "But I am here to tell you that if you persist in this, you'll only make fools of the lot of us."

"The challenge stands," I told him. "Artemisia's the only one who can call it off now, and I bet she won't. You could, I suppose, try going down on your knees and begging her forgiveness. I'm not sure it would work, but you could try. Otherwise, name the time and the place, and look to your honor and your sword."

He said, "How quaintly old-fashioned. No, my dear, it is you who will withdraw the challenge. There will be no time and no place, and we will not speak of this again." He did not wait for my answer, simply pulled on his gloves and opened the door to the little room, saying with the practiced heartiness of someone who is always telling people what to do, "Now, you are going to walk out of this building and back to Riverside and tell your uncle what I said. And there will be no more of this nonsense."

The sun was very bright. I walked stiffly across the expanse of Justice Place, not looking behind me. It was my guide who caught up to me.

"You didn't kill him," he accused. "I was sure you were gonna kill him."

I said, "I wish I had."

LORD FERRIS STROLLED WITHOUT HASTE TO WHERE a knot of noblemen awaited carriages to take them home to a hot dinner. "Trouble, Tony?" Philibert Davenant asked. "I heard there was something like a challenge."

"Something like." Ferris smiled. "Only a joke, that's all. Just more madness from poor Tremontaine."

His friends nodded. In recent years few of them had not been touched by some slight or folly of the duke's.

"Someone should do something," grumbled old Karleigh, and Ferris said, "Perhaps someone should."

I TOOK KEVIN DOWN TO THE KITCHENS WITH ME TO see whether anyone would feed him or give him a real job. If he ever learned to shut up, I thought he'd make a good guard or footman or something.

"Bread and cheese," the undercook told me, "that's all you're getting at this hour, with a host of starving scholars coming tonight that always expect the best, with hardly any warning, and woe betide us if they don't get it, too! He's more particular about his scholars than about his ladies and gentlemen."

At the other end of the long kitchen table, behind a stack of cabbages, beets and half-plucked fowl, someone made a choking noise. It was Marcus, coughing on a crumb from a large meat pie, or possibly his bowl of soup. I grabbed his soup bowl and offered it to Kevin.

"Hey!" Marcus protested.

"You don't need it."

"I do need it. I'm growing. I need my strength. Arthur Ghent says so, and he's got five brothers, he should know."

He was growing, it was true. "Marcus," I asked, "what about you? Do you have any brothers?"

"All thinking men are my brothers," Marcus said loftily.

Kevin lowered the soup bowl from his face for a moment. "I ain't your brother, pal."

"You can say that again." Marcus examined him. "Where'd you pick this one up?"

"Same place as you," Kevin cheeked him, and called him a name.

Marcus shoved back his bench. He rose towering above the scrawny Kevin. "Give me my soup back."

"Make me."

It looked as if he would, too. I could not believe it. "We are not starting a brawl in this kitchen!" I hissed at them both.

Marcus shrugged and drew back. "Have you checked your pockets, Katie? I would if I were you."

Kevin put down his soup and raised his hands. "I never did! You think I'm stupid or what? Not with the duke's own, never, I swear."

"Oh, honestly!" I huffed. "He was helping me, Marcus, to keep me from getting lost, that's all." I didn't like lying to him, even indirectly. But I wasn't ready to tell anyone about the challenge to Lord Ferris, not even Marcus. It was Artemisia's secret.

"I'm sure he was. But what do you think he does for a living, when he's not helping you cross the street?"

I stared hard at my friend. He reminded me of a farm dog when someone's on his territory. "I can guess," I said. "But it's none of my business."

"You think he's only a pickpocket? Not likely. Guess again."

"It's none of my business," I repeated doggedly. "And it's not very polite to talk about him in front of him like that, as if he weren't really there."

"Yeah," Kevin jeered. "Where was you raised, fella, in a ditch?"

Marcus grabbed his collar. "Out," he said. "Now."

"You kids are *all* outta here, right now!" The senior cook descended on us like the wrath of the storm god. "You think this is a schoolyard, or what? Out—or do I need to call Master Osborne?" Master Osborne was the steward. He had a lot of time for Marcus, who made his life so much easier by explaining what the duke really wanted, but you wouldn't want to risk getting on his bad side. Master Osborne was the one who decided how often your sheets got changed and how much firewood was in your room. "There's work going on here; someone's gonna chop you up instead of an onion, you don't yield space this minute!"

While Marcus was busy placating the cooks and I was busy avoiding him, Kevin disappeared with the soup bowl and a handful of beets.

SO THAT WAS WHY MARCUS STILL WASN'T SPEAKING to me. I didn't have much to say to him, either. Around the duke and his people, Marcus was always very poised and subtle; I'd never seen him downright rude before. To be fair, he'd

lived in this house a long time, and he wasn't going to learn manners from my uncle. But I saw no reason for him to be so mean to some poor starving Riverside kid. He'd been edgy ever since my fight at the Rogues' Ball. Had he guessed that I was keeping secrets from him? If he was my friend he would ask me himself, not take it out on a boy I was trying to help, wouldn't he?

I don't know how long this would have gone on if Lucius Perry hadn't made one of his regular visits to the Riverside house.

I got out of the way just in time. One of the servants was guiding him down the hall to my uncle's bedroom, and I was coming the other way, and I realized that meeting Perry here after the events of the Rogues' Ball would be more awkward than I could bear. So I grabbed the nearest doorknob and ducked inside, which was not very swordsmanly of me, but swordsmanship is not made for awkward social situations.

I turned, and there was Marcus, sitting at his shesh board, wrapped in a quilted silk robe. "You should knock first," he said snarkily. "Where were you raised, anyhow?"

"Look, I'm sorry," I babbled, "but it's him and I forgot to tell you but I know who he is now!"

He put the piece he was holding carefully down on the board. "How intriguing."

"I'm going to kill you," I snapped. "I know how, and all."

"One blow, straight to the heart…if I have to hear it one more time, I'm going to kill *myself*, don't bother. Who's in the hallway?"

I inclined my head toward the duke's bedroom.

"*Alcuin?*"

I couldn't resist a smile. "Lucius Perry."

"Who the hell is Lucius Perry?"

I told him.

Before I had even finished, Marcus was dressing to go out. "Rope," he said. "This time, we're going to get over that wall."

"What on earth for? We already know who he is."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I thought you were worried about your friend and him."

"It turns out he's her *cousin*, that's all, I already told you. What he does with his spare time is his own business."

"Or ours."

"Or the duke's," I said primly, remembering my uncle's admonitions.

"It's the duke's business only if we want it to be. But we don't. What do you bet His Lordship doesn't even know about that little house?"

"So what? It's just a regular house, Marcus. If we were going to follow Lucius Perry to Glinley's House of You-Know-What, that would be something."

"Next time," Marcus said, pulling on his boots, almost breathless with excitement. "Oh, Katie, can't you see it? Your Perry is a nobleman who lives all these different lives, and nobody knows about all of them, not even Tremontaine. We're the only ones; we'll be the only ones who'll have all the pieces."

"I don't want to hurt him," I cautioned. After what I'd witnessed in the kitchen, I wasn't sure I knew Marcus as well as I thought. "I mean, if you were thinking of extortion or something…"

"Don't be silly." Marcus pulled his boots snug. "I just want to know. Don't you?"

WE WERE NEITHER OF US VERY BIG, BUT SOMEHOW these past weeks Marcus had gotten taller than I. He was walking so quickly that I had to break into an undignified trot to keep up. "What's the hurry?" I panted as we toiled up the sloping street across the river.

"Are you sure you remember the house? I want to get there before him. I want to see him come in, see what he does."

We had a brief dispute about which alley it was, and then we recognized the cherry tree limb sticking out over the back wall of the house—it was definitely cherry, I could tell, now that it was showing signs of budding—so we knew we were in the right place. We did clever things with the rope and the branches, and then it was really pretty easy for us to skimble up and over the wall with hardly any whitewash on our legs.

It was a smallish garden, nicely laid out with little stone paths running between bushes and herbs that had been cut back for the winter, and patches covered with straw that would probably be flowers or strawberries. The back room of the house had tall windows that looked onto the garden. The tall bushes against the wall gave us a perfect spot for hiding, and a perfect view of the room and its occupant.

It was a woman close to my mother's age, with a strong face and auburn hair that looked like it had been carefully dressed in braided coils and a chignon that morning, but turned into a bird's nest by the succession of pens and paintbrushes she was pushing in and out of it. Her eyes were very wide set, and her lower lip was so full that it looked as though someone had taken a dessert spoon and scooped a little out from under it. She was not plump, but she was large, somehow, like a heroic stone sculpture. And even under the loose smock she wore, I could see she had quite a bosom.

The woman sat at a long table, staring intently at a bowl of fruit. Then she pulled a paintbrush out of her hair, licked the tip, dipped it into some paint and drew a few lines on the outside of a white bowl.

"What on earth is she doing?" Marcus hissed in my frozen ear.

"Painting china."

"Is she a painter, then? Is that all he's doing here, getting his portrait done?"

"This is different. It's very stylish; everyone wants painted china. Even ladies do it sometimes."

We watched her work on the bowl. It was turning into the petals of a flower.

"Is she a lady, then? She doesn't look like one. She's got paint on her smock, and her hands are dirty."

"Maybe it's his sister. Let's go," I whispered to Marcus; "I'm cold."

"Put your hood up," he murmured. "Wait 'til he comes."

I shifted uncomfortably. The shrub was scratching my neck. The woman looked up, and I was sure she'd heard me, but it was the maid coming into the room, and after her came Lucius Perry.

As soon as the maid had left with his cloak, Lucius Perry leaned over the woman and kissed her. He drew the pens and brushes out of her hair one by one, and he put his fingers into it and pulled it way out over her shoulders. It was very thick and lush, the woman's hair. You could tell from the way he was holding it that it weighed a lot. He kissed her again, and started to draw her toward the couch by the window.

"That's enough," I said, trying not to sound nervous. "I'm going."

"Shh!" said Marcus. "Do you think we can get closer? I want to hear what they're saying."

"They're not saying *anything*, Marcus. Just *Ooh, ahh, my darling* or something like that."

"They're talking," he said. "She's annoyed with him."

"Maybe she's just found out about Glinley's."

"Not that annoyed."

"So what is she saying?"

SHE WAS SAYING, "I'VE GOT TO GET THAT LAYER DONE before it dries, Lucius. Really."

"Paint it over." Lucius Perry was untying her smock with one hand, and feeling underneath it for her bodice with the other. "Later. I'll help you."

"Goodness. Such enthusiasm." Pulling herself up on one elbow (and pulling her chemise back over her shoulder), she ran a finger along his lips. She felt his hands loosen, his mouth part a little, and she smiled. "What have you been up to, to be so inspired?"

"Paying the duke his fee."

"I should have known. You always like that."

He lay back in blissful reflective surrender, and in a flash she'd leapt off the couch and over to her work table.

"Teresa!" Lucius Perry leaned precariously off the edge of the daybed, reaching across the studio to her. "Don't leave me like this!"

"Go to bed, Lucius," she said, and picked up a brush. "I mean, to real bed. I'll come to you there when I'm done."

"When?" he asked plaintively, lying back and staring at the ceiling.

"What does it matter, when? You'll go right to sleep, I know you. You've been up all night at the one place and half the day at the duke's already." She saw him arranging himself in an attractive position, left arm flung carelessly over his head, right-hand fingers curled against his thigh. He stretched like a cat in the weak winter sun, so that everything he had to offer was clearly defined.

Teresa took a sip of tisane that had gotten good and cold. "Now, listen," she said. "This afternoon Helena Montague is coming to take chocolate. She's one of the few still speaking to me; I cannot disappoint her. And she's asked me for six matching bowls." She curled her brush around the rim of this one, making an azure border. "I showed her my work last time she came, and very admiring of it she was. Claimed it was quite the prettiest she'd ever seen, and wanted a complete set, if I wasn't too busy." Teresa smiled dryly. "I assured

her I was not. I can't imagine what she'll do with them; give them to her hat-maker or something, I suppose, but she's going to pay me good money, and that's what matters."

"Good money?" Lucius said dreamily. His body had gone slack, as if he were talking in his sleep, which he practically was. "I've got money."

"I'm sure you've got plenty. Buy yourself a new hat."

He closed his eyes at last. His face was suddenly as still and holy as a king's on a tomb. "Marry me."

"Not this year," she said. "Maybe next. Come on, wake up," she said without looking at him, still working on her bowl. "Don't you want to be able to marry a respectable woman? If Helena Montague finds you lolling on my daybed looking like a model for the Oak God's lover, whatever is left of my name will go up in smoke like bonfire wishes."

"Marry…"

"Mmm-hmm. Well, at least they dry quickly. Though I suppose I'll just have to keep giving her more cakes until they do, so she can see. I should have started these last week, but I got a new idea for my first act. I do wish writing paid as reliably as painted china; it's so much more entertaining. But the public is fickle, and the theatre such a quagmire…I'm sure Sterling is cheating me on the gate. I wish I could do something original. I wish I could do comedy, but I'm just not—*Lucius*!" She said it so loudly that the two listening in the garden heard her voice bounce off the walls. "Wake up and go to bed. And send Nancy in to do my hair; it's come all undone."

WE WATCHED LUCIUS PERRY GET UP AND DRAG HIMSELF out of the room. "It's sooo exhausting," Marcus whispered, "working for the duke."

I giggled. "Now what?" I said.

"Back over the wall, Katie, quick! We have to see if he goes out the front."

"If he does, we'll follow him, right? Maybe he's got another girl somewhere else."

"Two girls! And don't forget the pony…"

We barely made it over the wall, and when we had watched the front of the house for long enough (in a not-very-good hiding place next to a house down the street—"Bring knucklebones next time," said Marcus; "we'll need to look like we're playing, like we belong here."), we went back and wrestled

the rope out of the tree. No one set any dogs or guards on us, so we must have been quiet and stealthy enough, though we were so charged up with the thrill of our triumph, I was sure we'd be caught.

Flushed and sweaty and grinning, we stowed the rope away. "And so?"

"Gingerbread," said Marcus. "It's traditional."

chapter VII

THEY TRIED FORCING HER TO EAT, AND THEY TRIED denying her food. It made no difference; Artemisia remained obdurate. They tried promising her treats, offering to buy her pets and jewels, even a trip to the races, for which she'd been agitating for months, but to no effect. Her mother considered threatening to cut off her hair—that had worked once—but it would spoil the wedding. Lord Ferris sent flowers, and daily notes inquiring after her health, which, after what she did to the first one they showed her, they kept to themselves.

When her good friend Lydia Godwin came to inquire after her, they very nearly turned her away. But Lydia was glowing with joy at her recent engagement to Armand Lindley, and perhaps, thought Lady Fitz, the girl could talk some sense into her.

When she saw Lydia's sweet face come through the door to her room, Artemisia melted altogether. She flung herself into her friend's arms, and wept there without a word. Strongly moved, Lydia wept, too. It was not until they both stopped to look for handkerchiefs that Lydia asked, "My dearest Mi, whatever is the matter?"

Artemisia seized her friend's hand. "Your father," she said tremulously, "Lord Godwin, he knows the law, does he not? Might you—might you ask him for me whether a girl is compelled to marry if her parents wish it, even if she does not? Even if she has given her word in betrothal—but now, she does not wish to?"

"Of course I will ask him, sweetest one. But surely your parents will not force you against your will? Even they cannot be so hopelessly old-fashioned."

"They will, I know they will—they are at me every day, and no one understands!"

"Dearest Mi, whatever has happened to you? What has Lord Ferris done, for you to take him so violently in dislike?"

For a moment, Artemisia considered telling her friend everything. But she knew that her dearest Lydia was a very conduit of news about all their friends' doings. And so she knew that, despite their great love, it would be next to impossible for Lydia to keep the sensational news of her ruin to herself. Artemisia wisely contented herself with crying out, "I cannot marry him! I would rather die!"

Lydia did her best to explain that, from her experience, true love and mutual understanding, such as she shared with her gentle Armand, were enough to conquer all impediments. But her words had little effect. Artemisia pressed her hands to her mouth and would not look at her.

Lydia sat and gently stroked her friend's hair. It was worse than she had thought. She'd seen Artemisia in a passion before, especially when she was trying to scare her parents. But never before had she refused to open her heart to her dearest friend—and never before had her eyes been quite so red, her face so taut, her breath so ragged. Lydia thought best how to divert her, that she might regain some comfort and composure.

"Mi," she said, "do you remember when we went to the theatre to see *The Empress*, and you had nightmares after?"

Artemisia shuddered. "That terrible woman, putting all those men to death. Why, is it playing again? I declare I would love to see it now, indeed I would. I understand her perfectly, now."

"It's not playing again, no; but the same splendid actress who was so proud and fierce in the role of the Empress, the actress they call the Black Rose… what will you think when I tell you that her company has commissioned a new play, for her to play the part of Stella!"

"You mean—" Artemisia caught her breath at the thought. "They are going to perform *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*—in a *theatre*?"

"It's already been played! Lavinia Perry and Jane Hetley both have seen it, for Jane's birthday."

"And?"

"Lavinia says that Henry Sterling as Fabian is a pale and feeble joke, though Jane says she'd marry him in an instant. But Lavinia has hardly a good word to say for the piece; she's vexed that they've left out the entire bit about the hunting cats, though I can hardly see how they'd play that onstage. Jane says it doesn't matter, because Mangrove's repentance at the end is even more affecting than it is in the book. But Lavinia thinks it is not true to the spirit of the novel."

"I never thought he was truly penitent. It's all a ruse, to confuse Stella to the last."

"That's what Jane says, too. She says you want to kill him yourself, he is so very wicked. Deliciously, she says."

"What about Tyrian? Is he handsome?"

"Oh, as for that, it hardly signifies. They've got a girl playing Tyrian."

"A girl? The same one who played the hero's friend in *The King's Wizard*? I bet it is. My brother Robbie was greatly taken with her. Still, a girl playing Tyrian…"

"They say her swordplay is very dashing."

"Does she kiss Stella, though?"

"They didn't say."

"What, after all that time we all spent practicing kissing with Lavinia, she didn't say? Rubbish."

"Well, we must go, then," Lydia said cheerfully, "and see it together and find out for ourselves."

Artemisia drew back. "I cannot."

"You cannot stay locked up in here forever!"

"I won't go out; I can't go out until I am free of this marriage."

"I'll tell you what, then!" Lydie tended to bounce when pleased, and she did so now. "We can sneak you out in secret. You can go masked—"

"No! No! No!" Artemisia's hands were over her ears. Lydie drew back in alarm, but then she chided herself for a false friend. She approached Artemisia cautiously. "Dearest darling, can't you tell me what is wrong?"

"I cannot marry him," Artemisia repeated. "I shall never marry anyone. It is too horrible to contemplate."

"Mi," Lydia said delicately, "has your mama perhaps said something to you about the married state that, perhaps, might frighten you or strike you as distasteful?"

Artemisia looked wonderingly at her. Was this the same Lydia who had helped her hide *The Couch of Eros* under her last year's hats? But she only said, "Mama speaks much of gowns and jewels and houses in the country. And," she added meanly, "of how marrying Lord Ferris means I should take precedence over you, no matter who you marry."

Lydia drew back. "Does she?"

"I hate her!" Artemisia exploded. "I hate her, I hate you all!"

To her eternal credit, Lydia Godwin weathered the storm. Indeed, she brought her friend nearly all the handkerchiefs in her box, one by one, saying cheerfully, "I shall have to speak to Dorrie about keeping your box well filled."

"Robbie says I am a watering-pot. I hate him, too."

"Robbie is often hateful. But I hope you know I would never do anything to injure you, my darling."

More tears, then, and vows of eternal friendship. And in that sweet moment, Artemisia thought of something. "Lydia," she said, "do you remember when Stella is in the country and Mangrove's minions are all around her and she doesn't know who to trust? And she needs to get a message to Fabian that would kill him if it goes awry? Well, there is a letter I need you to carry for me—just carry it out of the house, no more, and give it to someone to deliver."

Lydia's eyes opened wide. "Artemisia Fitz-Levi," she said, "do you have a *lover?*"

"Don't be disgusting, Lydia. What would I do with a lover? No, it's just a friend. But don't you understand? I'm a prisoner here. They guard me from all visitors but you, my darling, and of course they read my mail. I'm running out of things to bribe Dorrie with—I need you to do this!"

"I see…" Lydia twisted the handkerchief in her hands. "Give me the letter."

"Here." Artemisia lifted up one corner of her pink-flowered rug. "The maids only sweep under it once a week, lazy things."

It was addressed to *KT, Riverside House*. Lydia tucked it in her apron pocket, and Artemisia gripped both her hands, staring into her face with a

desperate fury not unlike that of the Empress when ordering her favorite to the sword. "Now swear!" she said. "Swear by your precious love for Lindley that you will tell no one. Not your mama, not your papa, not even him who your soul adores. No one. If you will do this for me, Lydia, then someday I will dance at your wedding, though I can never hope myself for such joy as you possess."

SOMETIMES AT BREAKFAST, IF SHE KEPT QUIET ENOUGH, Lydia's parents would forget that she was there. It was one reason she did not often breakfast in her room. She ate her toast very slowly, and listened to her mother telling her father, "Tremontaine is at it again. Dora Nevilleson told me her husband told her his valet saw him at the Rogues' Ball. Of course you know Nevilleson was there himself and just won't own up to it. The number of valets who were there, it must have been a convocation of nothing but gentlemen with clothes brushes, to hear the husbands tell of it."

"Funny." Lydia's father, Michael, Lord Godwin, buttered a piece of toast and sat watching the butter melt into the crispy bread. He was very particular about his toast. "My own valet did not attend. Or if he did, he's not saying."

"Good," said his wife. "Then you know nothing about this putative niece? The girl with the sword, who fought Todd Rippington there?"

"Of course I've heard about the niece, Rosamund, what do you take me for? I'm the Raven Chancellor. If the Duke Tremontaine has trained up some girl with a sword, and she's a relative, and she's begun to fight duels, it's going to come up before the Council of Honor sooner or later. It's our business to know. We don't want to look too alarmed when it does."

"Why should that alarm you?"

"The privilege of the sword is one of the rights of the nobility. The privilege only, and not the sword itself. That, we leave to professionals."

She touched his hand. "I know one noble who did things differently, once."

From the way Godwin returned his lady's look, Lydia was afraid her parents were going to head right upstairs for one of their little talks, leaving breakfast unfinished and her curiosity unsatisfied. But Michael Godwin just said, "That man took up both blade and privilege only once, and for a very worthy prize."

Was this the notorious duel her father had fought over her mother? She held her breath, waiting for details. But even her silence was too loud. Her mother returned to the debate.

"So," Rosamund persisted, "a young noblewoman with a blade who could fight for herself if she chose is very different from that young man?"

"Possibly." Lord Godwin sighed. "You have no idea what a muddle the rules and traditions of the Court of Honor is. Does the privilege even extend to women, or does it merely derive from their male relatives? There are precedents for one, and for the other, case by case and year by year, as the members change by fate and election. The dukes and Arlen have the only permanent seats, which is supposed to give it all some stability—and you'll know what that means when I remind you that the Duke Tremontaine is one of them!" His lady nodded wryly. "'Honor' appears to be a maze of unwritten rules and fiercely defended traditions. In the end, what is this girl? What's her legal status, and even her social one? Does she pass back and forth from noble to sword at a whim? And if so, whose whim?"

"Her uncle's, I imagine. Unless she kills him first."

"She can't kill him. Not in honorable challenge, anyway; the Court permits no one to profit from challenge within their own family. If she kills, she does it on his behalf."

"Or her own."

"It's all pretty alarming."

"I see. And what will you noble lords do about it now?"

"We watch and wait."

"I cannot like it, Michael. If this truly is his sister Talbert's child, then it's disgraceful for the duke to be encouraging her to run wild like that. A noble's daughter should be gently raised and properly cared for. Someone should do something."

"Tremontaine is the head of the family, and the family has not complained—not in Council, anyway, where it might do some good. I hear Greg Talbert's locked himself up with a serious head cold rather than answer any questions."

"She's only a girl, they say, no older than Lydia here."

"Well, sometimes I do wonder," Michael Godwin said, "if I should not have taught Lydia the sword. I won't always be around, you know, and if that goatish Lindley tries anything once they're wed…"

"Oh, Papa!" It hadn't been funny the first time, and had grown less so with every repetition since.

Her mother rushed in to the rescue, asking "How is your friend Artemisia, Lydie? I heard she was ill. Did you visit her yesterday?"

Her mother was so sensible and kind, not at all like Lady Fitz-Levi. It wouldn't be breaking her word to her friend to tell her mother how unhappy Mia was. "She's not so much ill as heartsick, Mama. She does not want to marry Lord Ferris at all, and they are going to *force* her. She weeps and weeps and will not eat, and is truly pitiful. Oh, is there nothing we can do?"

Her mother, who had ample experience of young Lady Artemisia's temperament, said cautiously, "Do you know what made her change her mind about her intended, dearest?"

"She will not say. But she is wretched, Mama. I've never seen her so distraught—well, almost never. Not for so long, anyway."

Her father gave her mother a look across the table. "My word on it," he said, "she's found out about the Black Rose."

"Michael," Lady Godwin warned, "perhaps this is not the time…"

"Rosamund, I think it is very much the time, with Lydie about to be married herself and launched into the world. I've been meaning to speak to her about it, in fact." He turned to his only daughter. "Lydia, dearest, what do you know about women who…Lydia. Let me begin again." Lady Godwin sighed audibly, but did not offer her husband assistance. "Men, as you know, have certain interests in life, and these interests sometimes lead them to do foolish things. Things their wives would not approve of. And I hope that if you see your husband doing anything foolish, you will not stand by without calling him to account for it."

Lydia tried to look very adult and trustworthy. "You need have no fears on that account, Papa. Armand and I have vowed always to tell each other everything."

"Just so," said Lord Godwin. "Of course, unmarried men are allowed to be a little foolish sometimes. It gives them something to improve upon, and their wives as well. So I hope you will not be altogether surprised if you learn, someday, that one of your friends' young husbands before his marriage was, ah, friendly with certain women of the town, hostesses and actresses and such, and became their protector. Most men, in fact, have such a past."

"But never their wives?"

"Oh, never the wives." Eyes downcast, her mother smiled. "Women have no past, just a grand and glorious future."

Lydia kept her face schooled to look as if all this was news to her. "The Black Rose is an actress," she said helpfully. "Is Lord Ferris her protector?"

"Was," said Michael Godwin. "She's a magnificent piece, just the sort of high-ticket, high-profile item Ferris goes for, and he went for her. It wasn't easy, either. The Rose is very picky. Easily bored, she says, and considering how many 'protectors' she's turned away, it must be true. But he likes a bit of a challenge, does our Crescent."

"Michael." His wife's voice carried a hint of steel.

"Just common knowledge," he added doucely. "It didn't last long, though. They had a bit of a row."

"A bit?" her mother said with relish. "I heard he had her thrown out of his house in the middle of the night like a common thing, with only the shift on her back."

Lydia gasped. "If Artemisia did something he disliked, would he have her thrown out in the snow, too? No wonder she doesn't want to marry him!"

"Certainly not, darling. No nobleman would dare to treat his wife that way. It would get back to her parents and her brother, and he would pay dearly for it. No, don't worry, it's surely not anything like that."

"Think about it, Lydie," her father said. "Your friend has a great deal of pride. She heard about the affair, and she wants to make him sorry. You must admit, she always does like to have the upper hand."

Lydia knit her brow in thought. It was true that Mia had been most interested when the Black Rose's name came up. And, to be fair, Mia had never liked being upstaged by anyone. "But if Lord Ferris has already left his mistress, then why should Mia mind so?"

"Because," her mother explained crisply, "it all happened around MidWinter. He was courting them both at the same time, that's why." Lydia let out a low whistle. "There!" Lady Godwin accused her husband. "That's what all this vulgar talk leads to. Lydia, no whistling in public, you know better."

"If you knew about Lord Ferris and the Black Rose, then surely her parents did as well. Why didn't anyone say anything?"

Lord Godwin said, "Artemisia's father is, ah, a man of the town. Even if he did know about Lord Ferris's affair with an actress, he surely knew it would blow over. He wouldn't let it interfere with a good marriage contract."

Lydia sat slowly digesting all this knowledge. Artemisia had never really loved Lord Ferris, she knew that. Maybe she was right not to marry him. Her

parents could not force her, surely. This matter would prove to be just another long contest of wills, such as were not unknown in the Fitz-Levi family. She vowed to visit Mia again soon with a box of her favorite chocolates and some diversion.

"The Black Rose is in a new play," Lydia said, "and all my friends have seen it. May I go?"

"Oh, dear," sighed her mother, "it's that awful piece of trash about the swordsman lover, isn't it? My friends were mad for that book when we were young."

"It's not trash," her daughter said. "It is full of great and noble truths of the heart. And swordfights."

"I'll have to read it," her father said brightly, but no one paid him any attention.

"I so want Mia to see the play," Lydia said. "If I can assure her that Lord Ferris will not be there—"

"He won't," her mother chuckled. "The Black Rose denied him entry to the theatre the morning after, and he hasn't been back since."

"Well, there you have it," Michael Godwin said to his daughter. "Actresses are spiteful creatures. You be sure you tell your Armand that he should be very cautious when he chooses a mistress."

A year ago, Lydia might still have giggled when he talked like that. But love had turned her serious, at least where love was concerned. "Oh, Papa," she said. "You know Armand never would."

"Of course not," her father said. "He knows I've got my eye on him."

chapter VIII

JUST KNOWING ABOUT LUCIUS PERRY AND HIS LADYLOVE made life more enjoyable. Whenever the duke got highhanded with us, implying that we were young and what did we know? we had to bite the inside of our cheeks to keep from laughing over the things we knew now that he did not.

Marcus and I speculated endlessly on what we had witnessed. I thought the lady was very wise, knowing Perry's proclivities, to refuse to yield to his advances, since clearly he'd lose interest the moment she did. Marcus, though, claimed she must be ignorant of his other lives, or she'd never let him in the door. His colorful theories included the possibility that the woman was really Perry's sister, so a little kissing was all she would allow. "He's steeped in vice," he said; "why shouldn't it run in the family?"

I pointed out stiffly that these things did not always run in families.

We should have been trying to find out who owned her house. It would have been fairly easy to go up to the door with a misdelivered message and use that as an excuse to grill the maid, or the neighbors' maids…We talked about it, but we never did anything. That wasn't the game, really. It was more of a challenge to try and catch both Lucius and his lady out together, see what they would betray to our inquisitiveness. What did they mean to each other? What were they hiding, and why? We wanted the secrets of their hearts, something no one else had, something they would be reluctant to yield to anyone else. We would hold it for them, and keep it safe, our treasure, whole and unique. Besides, the maid had a walleye.

It is possible, though, that lurking in late winter gardens was bad for the health. A few days later, Marcus caught a serious cold. While Marcus was in bed, my uncle sent for me. The duke was in his study with his friend Flavia, the unmercifully homely woman he kept around so they could make fun of people and do mathematical puzzles or something—at least, that's what they always seemed to be doing when I saw them together. Today they were

constructing some kind of a model—a tower, or maybe a clock, I couldn't quite tell, and I didn't want to ask and be lectured. I was wearing my splendid new cloak, because the day was finally warm enough that I could sling it back by the tassel and not have to worry about puddles.

Flavia looked up at me when I came in and said, "I've got it: You could have a career on the stage."

"As what?" my uncle asked. "She can't memorize anything, none of us can. Dates of crowns and battles leave her hapless."

"I know poetry," I said, but they ignored me.

"Well," Flavia told him, "in case you haven't noticed, the demand for female swordfighters is pretty much limited to Tremontaine House and the theatre, where they are enjoying a certain vogue."

"They can't really fight," he said crossly. "They just know a few moves, and they leap about showing their legs. Whereas Katherine is an excellent duelist—and always very modestly dressed," he added primly.

"Three yards of silk velvet isn't what I'd call modest," she said, but I knew he meant I didn't flash my legs around.

"Look," said my uncle, "speaking of theatre, how would you like to see a play?"

"Me?" I squeaked.

"Why not? I've got a box at the Hart, you may as well use it. They're playing this afternoon. You should go. Enjoy yourself." I waited. As a benevolent uncle, he wasn't very convincing. "And when it's done, you might like to go backstage and meet one of the actresses."

"The swordfighter?" Did he want me to give her a few tips? I'd die.

"No, the romantic lead. She's called the Black Rose. I've got something I'd like you to give her." He handed me a brocade pouch with something heavy slinking inside it. "It's a gold chain," he said, "and I'm trusting you not to run off with it. Just give it to her. She'll know who it's from, and what it means. But if anyone asks, it's a tribute from you to her, in admiration of her fine performance."

"Is she really that good?"

My uncle smiled creamily. "The best."

"Dear one, cease the salacious thoughts and hand me that piece—no, the little one. Butterfingers."

"Butterfingers, yourself."

SO THAT WAS HOW I WENT TO THE THEATRE FOR THE first time. I would have thought it was a temple, with its painted columns and bright facade, but the banners proclaimed it the LEAPING HART THEATRE, HENRY STERLING, ACTOR/MANAGER. At the last minute the duke had realized that if the chain was not to be seen coming from him, I shouldn't sit in his box. So he gave me money for a good seat in the stalls across from the stage, and money to tip the seatman, and more for snacks and incidentals. A girl in a lowcut bodice was selling nuts; I bought some but forgot to eat them, I was so excited to be there.

I felt a bit like an actress myself, in my gorgeous cloak and a new hat with a plume that Betty had produced at the last minute. The ticket-taker called me "sir," and I didn't bother to correct him; why not pass for a boy and enjoy the freedom of one? All things were permitted here, it seemed. I couldn't wait to see the actress with the sword.

Candles were lit on the stage, although it was still broad daylight. There was a bed on it, a big one with curtains. There were also curtains at the windows at the back of the stage, which were very tall, and a dressing table and a carpet. It looked like a lady's bedroom.

To the side of the stage, a consort started to play, and the audience quieted. Then a woman entered. There was a little sigh, because she was so very beautiful, deep bosomed and dark haired, gorgeously dressed in a rose-colored gown with many flounces, but her white throat was decked with simple pearls.

"No, thank you," she said to someone we couldn't see offstage, her maid, I guess. "I will put myself to bed." Somebody chuckled and was shushed. The woman unclasped her cloak and laid it on a chair. She did it with such an air of sweet weariness that you somehow knew that she had been out late, and enjoyed herself, too, but was more than ready for the day to be over. Languidly she reached up to her hair, and pulled two pins out. A fall of dark tresses released itself down her back, like an animal let loose. She reached for the clasp at her throat. It was then, when we were admiring her private moment of grace and release, thinking it was only for us, that a man stepped out from behind one of her long bedroom curtains. He was devastatingly handsome and carried a sword. His voice, when he spoke, was warm and rich like poured chocolate—but it was not that which made me catch my breath.

"Lady Stella," he said. "Allow me."

I had to dig my nails into my palms to keep from squeaking out loud. As it was, I began moving my lips along with the lines. I knew them all, from the opening chapter of my favorite book.

Fabian snuffed the candles, one by one. On the dusky stage he drew Stella to him, and they disappeared together within the bedcurtains. A woman behind me squeaked happily. The curtains didn't stir, but the consort began to play a slow and lovely air. When it was done, her maid came in and pulled back the draperies, first the high ones at the window, and then the bedcurtains.

Stella was revealed alone in the bed, her dark hair falling over her white ruffled nightdress. She rose and went to the window, and we saw that it was open a little, as though someone had left without quite closing it behind him. She turned and looked out over the audience, one hand stroking her hair.

"I was a girl before tonight. I am a woman now."

It was the oddest feeling in the world, seeing something that had belonged so utterly to me alone being made to happen up on the stage with living people doing it, and others watching it. (I'd lent Marcus the book once. When I finally asked for it back he never said anything, so either he hadn't liked it or he hadn't bothered to read it.)

When they got to the fight in the clocktower between Mangrove and Fabian, the swords finally came out in earnest. Henry Sterling's swordplay was not bad—he certainly had the flair and the spirit of Fabian—but whoever played Mangrove really knew what he was doing with his wrist. It was almost a surprise when he dropped his sword and fled in confusion.

Mangrove was all wrong, of course—too short, for one thing, because he's supposed to be much taller than Fabian, and Henry Sterling was a truly magnificent Fabian, especially when he tells Stella (wrongly) that he's glad it's Tyrian's child because Mangrove is right and his own seed is cursed—but it must have been hard to find an actor taller than Sterling. And Mangrove should have had a mustache, because in the scene where he kisses Stella, she is repelled by it, but of course they left that out. The gorgeous actress playing Stella, who was surely the Black Rose, did a wonderful job of looking repelled just the same: she did a little thing with curling her fingers behind her back that meant she was filled with disgust, you could tell.

Tyrian. I wasn't sure how I felt about Tyrian. You could tell it was a woman, if you looked hard and thought about it. But everyone onstage referred to her

as “he” and treated her like a man, so you sort of had to go along with it. She did take big swaggering steps like a man, and held her head a certain way, and she had cut all her hair right off, so that it stood in fair little curls all over her head. Even in the book there is a certain softness to Tyrian, a gentleness that makes you like him and think it would not be so bad if Stella chose him over his friend. The actress was very good at that, the way she looked at Stella when Stella wasn’t looking, and the way she stepped back when Stella was thinking and all. Maybe they just couldn’t find a man to play Tyrian that well. She did look very dashing with her sword at her side; I could hardly wait to see her use it later.

Tyrian made his vow to Fabian, and the two of them left, and everyone applauded. I waited eagerly, but nothing happened. The stage was empty, the consort was playing, and the audience started talking and getting up. I worried that something had gone wrong, but no one else seemed concerned. Vendors came back selling bags of nuts and bunches of flowers. Some had little black silk rosettes and tiny silver swords for people to pin in their hats or on their sleeves as tokens of the two lead actresses to show which they liked best. The actress playing Tyrian was called Viola Fine. Her little sword appealed to me, but I thought I should buy a rose if I was going to see the Black Rose. In the end I did neither, but I did get a printed picture of the actor Henry Sterling in the role of Fabian, his arm raised to his brow in an attitude of anguish. They had colored ones, too, for more money, but I thought I could color it myself when I got home. I would ask my uncle to give me watercolors.

Then they blew trumpets, and we all found our seats again.

The second half wasn’t as good as the first, because they had to cut too much out, like Stella’s horse race and the terror of the hunting cats. Instead the actors made long speeches about love which were never in the book, and weren’t as good. I watched Tyrian more closely. Viola Fine was supposed to be an actual man, not a woman swordsman, but if you thought about it realistically, that’s what she was. Like me. Only not for real: my uncle was right, her swordplay was just for show. That huge disengage of hers would get her killed in a real fight. I wondered if she liked playing a man. When Viola Fine first went on the stage, had she *chosen* roles where she could stride about, her cloak swirling around her, or had she really been hoping to play Stella or someone with gorgeous gowns and luxurious curls and jewels that

couldn't have been real but glittered fantastically, and men saying they would die for her?

I was not the only person in the audience holding her breath when Tyrian approached Stella for the kiss. "You have done tonight," she said, "what ten thousand men could not."

"Now," the Black Rose murmured low, but we could all hear it, somehow, "let me show you what one woman alone can do."

She leaned towards Viola. Viola's eyes closed languidly. The Black Rose came closer—and then her eyes opened wide, following the entrance of Mangrove's minions on the roof (instead of the hunting cats).

It might be nice to be an actress, after all. I was a better swordsman than Viola Fine already, wasn't I? Maybe someone would write a play just for me, one where a real woman could fight with her sword, and had many fine adventures and changes of costume. Maybe Henry Sterling would play a man who loves me madly but thinks I love only the sword, while really I am smoldering with passion for him. Or maybe Viola could play the hero, and I could play a woman who disguises herself as a man in order to get close to her and—what? We could have a terrific fight at the end, maybe, and kill each other, and the audience would be sobbing, the way they do at the end of the play when Tyrian cradles Stella's head in his arms, rocking her and letting her think he's Fabian, who's already taken the potion, but Stella doesn't know it.

I can make myself cry just thinking of it. And the way Viola rose to her feet, looking for someone to fight but there is no one left—there was such a look of desolation there. I wondered if she was lonely, too.

All around me, people were jumping to their feet and clapping and yelling and throwing things—flowers, nuts, handkerchiefs stained with kisses—and wiping their eyes, as well. A girl behind me said to her friend, "I've seen it eleven times now, and I always say I won't cry, and then I do."

"I know," her friend said. "I keep wanting it to end differently, but it never does. Oh, there she is!"

The Black Rose swept back onstage, glowing with a tragic dignity. Her magnificent bosom swelled as she took a deep breath and bowed low to the crowd. The girl behind me started gasping, "I'll die, I'll die…Oh, just hold me! Isn't she *fine*? I've written her a dozen letters, but she never answers."

I thought smugly of the chain in my pocket that would gain me access to her dressing room.

But it turned out not to be that simple. There was a porter guarding the back door to the stage, and quite a few other people who were trying to get in, as well. Most of them had brought bunches of flowers, some very nice indeed. A couple of the biggest were carried by liveried servants, whose masters waited behind in their carriages, watching through the doors to see what transpired.

It was too late to go back for flowers, I thought; best get this over with. I shoved myself to the front of the crowd, right up against a woman with a necklace of silver swords strung around a turban on her head. She pulled away as though I had bitten her. "How dare you, fellow!"

"I'm sorry," I stammered, horribly flustered, for if I had been a man it would of course have been unspeakable for me to brush up against a woman like that. "I'm not—It's all right, really it is. I'm a lady—like Tyrian, I mean Viola."

"Rea-ally?" She looked me up and down. "Is it a new fad?"

"I wish I had the legs for it," said the well-dressed older woman next to her, who wore a black velvet neck ribbon with a silver sword depending from it. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Katherine."

"Is that a real sword you've got?"

"Do you like swords, Katherine?"

The people behind us were pushing forward, so that the ladies were very nearly on top of me. They smelled of powder and expensive perfume. Their only blades may have been finger-length, but I fell back before them as if they carried real ones, and I defenseless.

I stepped on the porter's toe. "Oi!" he said. "None of that here. What do you think you're doing?"

I turned around and looked up into his solid face. "My name is Katherine Talbert. I'm here to see the Black Rose."

"You and half the city," he grumbled. "Listen, kiddo, nice try, but the part of Tyrian is already booked. You want to act, you come back another time. Master Sterling don't see new actresses but on Tuesday mornings."

"Oh, please," I said. "I'll only be a moment. I've just got to give her this—" and I held up the chain in its sack, letting him hear the chink of metal.

"Nice for her," he said gruffly. An aggressive servant shoved a huge hothouse bouquet in his face—as the porter tried to defend against it, I reached for his hand, stuck a coin in it, and, with the slippery little sideways wriggle that always worked when I needed to grab something from the

kitchen table when the cooks were all busy, slipped past him and through the back door of the theatre.

It was a different world: quiet and frantic, real and imaginary, all at once. It smelt of oil and wax and sweat and fresh wood shavings. There were raw beams and intricately painted canvases, yards of dusty air overhead and people appearing and disappearing below.

"I'm sick to death of it!" One of Fabian's friends strode past me with another, still wearing the top half of his costume. "He does it every time, on purpose, just to make me look cheap."

"Of course he does, my dear; you threaten him."

Against the wall I recognized props from scenes in the play: Stella's bedroom candelabra, Mangrove's velvet chair, the trunk from the sea voyage and halberds from the guards. A workman held one in his hand, shouting, "You're mad if you think I can make another horse before tomorrow! What do I look like, a brood mare? Just nail the damned thing back together, and tell him I'm working on it!"

"Excuse me." I tugged at his sleeve. "I've come to see the Black Rose."

He nodded at a door across the way. "In there." He raised the halberd again. "And tell them to be *careful* next time! It's *not* a *real horse!*"

The door was not fully closed. I stood for a moment, trying to breathe normally, to get the feel for where I was and what I was doing.

I heard a woman's voice inside. "God, you are the biggest tease in the world. I'll have that kiss now, Rose, if you please."

There was a low, throaty chuckle. I recognized it from Stella's ball scene. "Why not? You worked hard for it."

Stiff cloth rustled. Someone hummed. Then the voice that was not Rose's spoke a line from the play, mockingly, romantically: "*I was a girl before tonight.*"

I put my head very carefully inside the door. A black head and a fair one with short, close-cropped curls were pressed together.

It was the missing kiss from *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*, the kiss Tyrian wanted but never got. Stella was giving it to Tyrian now, at last, as I watched them. I lifted my fingers to my own mouth, barely breathing. Viola was still wearing her costume; the Black Rose had changed into a loose gown over her chemise. Viola's fingers were pressed into the Rose's hair, pulling her head even closer. She moaned softly, and I think I did, too.

I felt a strange glowing in my body, right at the fork of my breeches. It was like nothing on earth I'd ever felt before, and it was right there where a man

keeps his tool. Oh, dear god. Heat and cold touched me all at once. Was all this dressing up and swordfighting turning me into a man? Had it happened to the actress already, with her sword and her breeches and her cropped hair? No one had warned me. What could I do? I would die, I would die if I was growing one. Slowly, cautiously, I put my hand down there to see. I didn't feel anything through my breeches that hadn't been there before. I squeezed a little harder to be sure, and caught my breath at the sense that shot through me. It was indescribably, undeniably good. Suddenly it didn't seem to matter what was down there. So what if I was growing one? Men never complained of it, did they? In fact, if this was the pleasure they were always crowing about, I wasn't sure I didn't want one after all. I thought of Marcus. He had one, too, didn't he? He could show me how to use it. I wouldn't mind if he did. I squeezed a little harder.

My eyes were closed. I saw Tyrian kissing the Black Rose, and Viola kissing Stella. I thought about curling up in bed with my curtains drawn and reading the book again, but this time seeing the two of them kissing, kissing, kissing after the play was over and the real story began.

I squeezed harder still, and then I didn't think anything at all except how I wished what was happening wouldn't stop, only it did, rather suddenly, and I had to put my hand on the doorpost. The kiss had finished; they were looking into each other's eyes.

"You're a girl still," the Black Rose told her. "Don't let that sword deceive you."

Viola laughed huskily. "Thanks for nothing. I know exactly what it's good for."

"Be careful," Rose said. "Don't let it go to your head. They come on strong, but they can leave you with nothing."

"Speak for yourself, sweetness." Viola straightened her jacket. "I know how to handle them."

Rose shook her head. "You really don't mind, do you?"

"Mind what?"

"The way they want you to be *him* for them."

"Why not? I love acting. Don't you?"

"In a well-crafted play, of course. But I don't do private theatricals."

"You don't know what you're missing." As she turned to the door, I gathered myself together and knocked. "Adoring Public, Rose!" Viola cried jauntily as she passed me.

My face was still flushed, my breathing shallow. “Come in!” the Black Rose sang out melodiously, but when she saw me in my boy’s clothes she said, “Oh, dear.”

“It’s not what you think,” I said. “I’m real.”

She said, “Oh,” and then she said, “Oh,” again, in a different tone. “I know. You’re the duke’s girl.”

“He sent you this.” I fumbled the brocade pouch out of my pocket with my sweaty hand, and held it out to her. I couldn’t meet her eyes.

The Black Rose was very tall. She looked at me, and then she went and closed the door, and came back and sat down. She took the chain out. It was heavy, made of several links braided together, and very long.

“That’s worth a lot,” she said. She bent her neck and pulled her hair up out of the way. “Would you like to put it on me?”

She must have known my face would be in her hair. She smelled like nothing else on earth. I kissed her hair, and put my hand on her white hand that held it above her neck. She turned, and tilted her head up to me, and I kissed her on the lips.

Her lips were very soft and warm and full. I felt them curve in a smile under mine. I couldn’t help smiling back.

“I see,” she said. She lowered her hair and turned around, and reached up and kissed me again, a mother’s kiss. “What’s your name, sweetness?”

“Katherine. Katherine Talbert.”

“Well, Katherine Talbert, thank you for the gift.”

“It’s from my—”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

“Oh.” I felt my face color up, but I stood my ground. She must have liked the kiss, after all. I was sure I’d done it all wrong.

She weighed a length of chain in her hand. “He’s a kind man, your uncle. Thoughtful. Please tell him—since we are alone here—please tell him that I will have something for him soon.”

I said, “He likes other men, you know.”

“So do I.” The Black Rose smiled. She reached up her hand again and pushed back my hair. “You’re a pretty girl, Katherine. Did you like the play?”

“Yes. Very much.”

“Come again, then. I’ll do better next time on the ‘I am a woman’ speech. I don’t think I quite nailed it tonight. Though the bit with Mangrove on the

stairs went rather well, I thought…" There was a sharp knock on the door. "My dresser," she told me. "You'd better go before the hordes descend."

I went out the door. I felt as if I had no body, I was so light. It was not an entirely pleasant feeling; I had gotten used to knowing exactly where I was. I leaned against the wall and watched as the dresser opened the door to some well-dressed men with flowers. I heard the actress crowing, "My dear! It's been ages! What hole have you been hiding in?"

I left the theatre. I walked for a long time, and not home to Riverside. When I stopped, I was standing in front of the house of the china painter, Lucius Perry's mistress. The last time we were there, I had wanted to leave when they started kissing on the couch. But now I wished that I could see it, very much. I wanted to bang on her door until she came out with brushes in her hair, and make her invite me in for tea so I could ask her whether she really liked it, and if she'd done it with anyone besides Lucius Perry, if she even had, and why? But I didn't dare. I was wearing my best clothes; I could not go up over the wall, either. And if I did, all I'd probably see was her painting china, anyway.

TERESA LAY ON THE COUCH IN HER STUDIO, AND CRIED and cried. She was pretty much done when Lucius came in, pink and disheveled from a quick nap in her room and a long night before that. He blinked at her and said, "I have to go. I'm expected at my cousins' for a card party, and I've cried off too many times before."

"Off you go, then," Teresa said, but her voice sounded strange, even to her. She jammed the letter into her pocket.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. Another bill, that's all."

"You've been crying."

"Rubbing my eyes, that's all. I got paint in them or something."

"Do you need money?" He sat on the couch, on a shawl still damp and wrinkled from her weeping, and held out his hand to her, asking, "What is it, what's the matter?"

She stared at the hand as if it might bite her. But she answered him. "It's Roddy—my husband's family, I mean. They send me these horrible letters. I shouldn't read them, really, they're always the same. It all comes down to the

same stupid thing: they won't return my dowry, what remains of it, anyway, because I left him. That's all."

There was a table between them, cluttered with art supplies. Still, he went down on his knees, self-consciously theatrical, and held out his arms to her.

"Marry me," he said. "I know I'm not much of a prize, but I can offer you the protection of my name, and all the true devotion you can stand."

She stared at him. "Oh, Lucius." She was laughing, but the tears refused to stop. "Oh, Lucius, no. I can't."

"Am I too loose for you? I could reform, you know."

"I don't want you to reform. You're even worse than I am. I like that."

"Then marry me, and we'll be bad together all the time."

"I can't." He looked so silly down there. She was laughing; the tears were just left over, that's all.

"Come on, Teresa, please?"

"I just can't, that's all. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't marry you."

"Why not?"

"Because my husband's still alive."

He dropped his arms. From his knees, he looked up at her. "Your husband is dead."

"No, he isn't. I wish he were, but he is not."

"You told me he was dead."

"I never said so. I just let you think it."

"And you think I didn't inquire elsewhere? No one's seen Roderick Trevelyn for years."

She jammed her hand in her pocket. "Then how is he writing me letters?"

Her lover took the paper from her. She let him unfold it and watched him scan the words, his face wrinkling in disgust. "This is insane," Lucius said. "It's revolting. He doesn't—this is insane."

"Yes. They've got him nicely locked away, but he still writes."

"Who lets him send them?"

"His family, of course. They won't give me a divorce. They want me back."

"For landsake, *why*?"

She wiped her eyes, took a breath. "To punish me, I suppose. I didn't give them what they wanted. It got worse, after I left, they tell me. They say if I came back, he would get better."

"No one who writes like this is going to get better. Why didn't you try to divorce him before you left? There would have been witnesses, you could have

—"

She seized the paper back from him. "Do you think I wanted witnesses?" she flared. "Do you think I wanted the world to know what he was doing to me? I had no family, no money of my own—do you think anyone would even have believed me if I'd taken my stories to court against my husband and all his family?"

He watched her blaze across the room, back and forth like a comet in its course.

"I'm sorry," he said. She flew at him as if she would attack him, but he stood his ground, arms at his side, and she flung hers around him and clung to Lucius Perry for dear life.

IT WAS COLD IN THE SHADOW OF THE HOUSES. I FELT lightheaded; it was hours since I'd eaten anything. I reached in my pocket for the nuts I'd bought at the theatre, and ate them, and felt a little better. I unfolded the paper they came in. It was a playbill from the theatre.

THE SWORDSMAN WHOSE NAME WAS NOT DEATH,
A NEW DRAMA
BY A LADY OF QUALITY
NOW PLAYING
AT THE LEAPING HART THEATRE ON WEST BANK,
HENRY STERLING, ACTOR & MANAGER
WITH THE ADDITIONAL TALENTS OF
THE INCOMPARABLE BLACK ROSE,
THE FIERCE MASTER PINCUS FURY,
AND INTRODUCING
THE BOLD DASHING YOUNG MISTRESS VIOLA FINE AND
DIVERSE OTHER TALENTS
CERTAIN TO ENRAPTURE & ENTERTAIN
A NEW DRAMA NEVER BEFORE PLAYED BEFORE THE PUBLIC!
UNLIMITED ENGAGEMENT OPEN TO THE VAGARIES OF PUBLIC TASTE.
IF YOU APPEAR, WE WILL PLAY!

"By a Lady of Quality." Was it the same one who had written the novel? Maybe it was someone younger, someone who had read the book as a girl and

loved it and wanted to see it on the stage. "A Lady of Quality"—that meant a noblewoman. Could it be someone I knew? Someone who had been to one of the duke's parties? The duke's ugly friend Flavia had been speaking of the theatre. She was clever, but I didn't think she was noble. I tried to see her as the mysterious author, but I could barely imagine her reading the book, much less writing about it.

Did the Lady of Quality ever come to see her own play onstage? What did she think of the way the actors played their roles? And did she ever go backstage to visit them after?

TERESA DREW A HARSH BREATH, AND THEN ANOTHER. HE let her try to find control in the safety of his arms.

"I understand," he said. "It's all right. It's not your fault. You couldn't know."

"I didn't know," she whimpered like a child. "I really didn't know. How could I? No one told me."

She didn't realize how tightly she held the letter in her hand. "Oh, Lucius, he was so beautiful once. He was like a young forest god, all dappled golden. It made it harder to believe what he was capable of. Even when I was all bloody and aching, I'd look at that face, that perfect face, and wonder if I could be mistaken, if somehow I really had done something so terrible that he was perfectly justified in what he did.

"But he never said he was sorry. That's how I knew. The other girls—I knew women married to men who merely drank, or had bad tempers. They never tell you before the wedding—maybe your mother is supposed to know—but theirs must not have, and of course I didn't have one. Afterwards, though, it all comes out. We'd sit together over our sewing and our chocolate, and one would flinch or try to hide a bruise…and so we knew. And sometimes, though not often, one or the other would say, *It's all my fault, I know it is. I should try harder. I make him angry. He cries, you know, he cries and tells me how sorry he is, and begs me not to make him so angry*…And she'd show us the jewel he'd bought her, to prove how much he really loved her after all.

"Roderick never said he was sorry. He would just look at me as if I weren't really there, as if my weeping were some pointless annoyance. So maybe I was

lucky; at least I knew the truth." She laughed, an old, brittle echo of the drawing room. "I tried to kill him once."

"Why didn't you do it?" Lucius Perry asked harshly.

"I'm not sure." Teresa walked away from him, across the room. If she was going to speak of these things, she did not want to be held or touched by anyone. "I stood over him with the poker while he slept in a chair by the fire. We'd both been reading there, very quiet and companionable, and Roddy fell asleep. I didn't know, when he woke up, whether he would be—agreeable, or the other way. You never knew with him. I stood there with the poker, knowing I had only a few minutes and that I would have to beat his brains out. And it wasn't that I didn't want to spoil his beauty, although I didn't, really. It was just a—a ridiculous moment of clarity, when I realized that putting an end to his life would ruin mine; that it would be simple now and simple afterwards because it would all be over, but that wasn't what I really wanted. I realized I had another choice, which was much less simple but much more attractive."

She put her hand up against the windowpane, looking out at the empty winter garden. "I knew in that moment that I would leave, that it was only a matter of time. It made the waiting bearable as things got worse. I had it all thought out—what I would take, how I would get out—not where I would go, though; there didn't seem to be anything more important than getting out the door, and I was afraid to tell anyone beforehand. So one day I went upstairs, put some things in a bag, and walked out the door and into a great many complications. But at least I had something I wanted. And I have it still."

He stood waiting, listening.

"They never forgave me, the ones who stayed." Her breath misted the glass. "Ladies who'd wept on my bosom, as I wept on theirs—girls I shared secrets with of how to layer powder so the bruises wouldn't show. They are not the ones who buy my work, or send me flowers left over from their parties. They are the ones who castigate me loudly in public for leaving my poor husband when he needed me most. They are the women who won't receive me in their houses, and turn their heads away when they see me on the street."

"I won't let them hurt you anymore."

She shook her head, smiling mirthlessly. "Now you sound like one of my heroes. Maybe that's why I like you so much."

"Love me," he insisted.

"I may. I probably do. But I've tried that word before, and those feelings, and look where it got me."

"Abjuring love? Real people don't do that. Now you're the one who sounds like someone on a stage. That's not the real world. Real people follow their hearts, wherever it takes them. Real people refuse to be put into a little tiny box. You can say you love me or you don't love me, it doesn't matter; I know you have forsworn nothing except an existence you found intolerable."

She really did smile this time. "Now you're making me sound like a heroine. Be honest, Lucius. For all that you go on about the real world with its real people, you don't really want to live in it, either."

"I like," he said in a nobleman's lazy drawl, "to have some choice of which world I inhabit, that's all."

"Yes. And so do I. Which is why I am perfectly content where I am, and as I am." She went to the table, straightened some brushes there. "Really, I don't know why I made such a scene. I must be spending too much time with the theatre. China is so much more restful. All those nice patterns. I'd better get back to it."

"Well, then," he said.

"Well, then." She kissed him, long and hard. "And you have business of your own to attend to." Teresa buttoned up his jacket. "Go to your card party. Come back when you can."

I SAW HIM COME OUT THE DOOR IN A HOODED CLOAK, old-fashioned and concealing. But I knew who it was. Lord Lucius Perry walked off up the street, and I followed him. He was headed up toward the Hill, and never looked behind him.

The house he stopped at was one of the grand ones, guarded, with a wall. The gates were open, and the house was brightly lit. Not one of his secret visits, then. A party in a noble's house. I thought about following him through the gates, trying to pass as a guest, and then I thought, What for? They wouldn't want me. Nobody did. Alcuin had been right: I was a *thing*, a sword for folk to bet on, a toy for actresses to play with. Even the mysterious Lucius Perry, the duke's pet, the Riverside prostitute, the painter's secret

visitor, even Lucius Perry had places he could go, where he could sit and talk and eat and drink like a normal person, but I was nothing.

I stood outside the gate, my velvet cloak drawn tight around me against the cold. It was getting dark. How was I going to get safely back to Riverside? I'd need to hire a torch. It was a long way, through a bad part of town, and I was tired.

"Out of the way, damn you!"

A chaise carried by two burly men nearly ran me down as they turned into the gate. My heart was pounding with shock and rage, now that they were gone by. But as they came out, I saw they bore no crest and might be for hire.

"Stop," I said hoarsely. "Will you carry me to Riverside?"

"'S a long way. You want four men for that."

"To the Bridge, then, will you do that?"

"Maybe. Cost you. Two in silver—and we'll see your money, first."

I dug in my pocket for the theatre change. Eight coppers and five minnows was all I had left. I remembered the weight of the gold chain I'd just carried, and suddenly I felt hot and angry. I wasn't the duke's messenger boy. If my uncle wanted me to do him favors, let him pay for them. The Duke Tremontaine didn't think about these things? Well then, I would.

"To the duke's house in Riverside," I said. "The steward there will pay you —three silver." He could afford it. "And if you won't take it, I'll find others who will."

They were good chair men; it wasn't too bumpy a ride. But even if it had been, I was too tired to mind much. I closed my eyes and saw the stage, the brightly costumed actors trying so hard to be Mangrove and Fabian, Tyrian and Stella for us all, and the men and women crowding around afterwards, with their little swords and roses. I didn't want to think about the crop-haired, trousered Viola, but she was like a sore tooth I just had to poke at. Was I like her? Did I want to be?

The Black Rose had kissed her, and then kissed me. I thought of the way the actress's hair had smelt, how soft it was under my hands, and I felt that warmth again at the cleft of my legs. It wasn't quite as fierce this time, and I remembered that I had, in fact, felt something like it before.

When I was very small, my nurse had caught me sleeping with my blanket ruched up between my legs because it felt nice, the way swinging on a tree branch sometimes did. She said, "Don't you be rubbing yourself there. Do you want to start growing a birdie, like your brothers'?"

When I asked her if she had rubbed their birdies to make them grow, she'd laughed so hard she could barely talk, and then she said, "Indeed I did; and when you're married, you'll rub your husband's to make it grow, oh yes you will."

When I was a little older, the cook's daughter took me to help her feed the fowl in the yard and explained what the rooster was doing to the hens, and how I was to think nothing of it, for every creature on earth did the same. My mother said that wasn't quite true, for men and women weren't like the brute beasts; we had to be married first for it to work.

I'd never thought of all these things at once, never connected each story to the others, and as the chair bumped along, I unraveled and interwove them.

Of course I wasn't growing a birdie now. I shook my head and snorted at my panic in the theatre. I wasn't a baby. Women had pleasure down there. I just hadn't known it could take you so suddenly like that, for no reason.

My grandmother—my mother's mother, and the duke's—had a special chapel in her house. It was because she was Reform, which seemed to mean she believed that everything wrong with the world was because the old kings had been especially evil and done things to displease the gods, and the nobles who overthrew them had been cleansing the land of impurities. She was very pious and always lit candles on the Feast of the Last King's Fall, and told me about our heroic ancestor, who had killed him in a duel. She tried to get me to be Reform, too, but I was very young when she died, and I hadn't met anyone Reform since then. I thought about the things she'd said that had not quite made sense, and realized that what she'd meant about the kings being so awful was not so much that the kings had not always been married, but that they had gone with other men.

No wonder my uncle wasn't speaking to her when she died.

Was I really like him? Did it run in families, after all?

No. There was no way on earth I would ever take up with someone like the horrible Alcuin, let alone start getting drunk and inviting fifteen naked people into my bedroom. Not on this earth. I was not like that, and never would be. I pulled my cloak tight around me—and shivered at the memory that assailed me, the thing I'd almost managed to forget. Last Night, and the firelight at Highcombe, and the sense that my uncle belonged there, in that small room with me and the master. He belonged there as much as I did, because St Vier loved him the way the old kings were not supposed to love

people, and whatever my uncle did with the others, he loved the man at Highcombe almost too much to bear.

Well, if I ever loved anyone that much, man or woman, I would never do what he did. I'd been happy at Highcombe; I knew where I was and what I was doing there. And the duke had come and ruined everything, and dragged me back here where I didn't belong. He couldn't stay at Highcombe with the person he loved best in the world, so I couldn't either. He was a selfish crazy pig and I hated him utterly.

I cried then, because it was all so hopeless and I was so lonely and nothing and no one made any sense at all. This city was a terrible place. Look what had happened to Artemisia. When I first came to the city and met her, she had everything I thought I'd wanted, and look where she was now.

I wondered if she had seen the play, and what she would think of it, and what she would think of the Black Rose, and what she would think of me if she knew that Rose had kissed me. In her letters to me, Artemisia signed herself *Lady Stella*. Did she really think of me as Fabian, the peerless and righteous master swordsman? I was glad I had a sword to defend her; I liked being her champion. But what about the kiss that came after?

Would Artemisia kiss me, too, if I wanted her to? What if I killed Mangrove, and then stood over her and said, "Lady Stella, though your enemies sought your destruction, I have made them my own, and made them pay the price for it," what then?

I would definitely kiss Lady Stella. I wasn't sure about Artemisia, though. She was inclined to be a little silly, and not always reliable.

The chaise set down with a bump. I pulled back the curtain and found we were already at the Riverside house. I hadn't even known we'd crossed the Bridge. The house's torches were burning, and my friend Ralph was one of the guards at the door. I got out of the chaise as grandly as I could (considering my feet were so cold I could no longer feel them), gathering my cloak and my sword about me, and, "Ralph," I said, "please see to it that these men are paid. Three silver, not a minnow more. Oh, and make sure they get something hot to drink. It was a long trip."

I went inside the house. I felt as if I had been gone a hundred years, but it was just past dinnertime (the duke dined early and sometimes, when he got hungry, he dined twice). Betty was in the servants' hall. I went and rousted her, and she took my hat and cloak up to my room with me.

"Feather's ruined," she said. "Good show, then, eh, my lady?"

"It was all right."

"Never mind, we'll get you another. Dinner's past; I'll bring you up a tray."

"Take it to Marcus's room, then; I want to go see how he is."

"Sick is how he is," Betty said firmly, "and Cora is nursing him. But I've been wanting to talk about that," she continued ominously. My heart skipped a beat. Was Marcus sicker than we'd thought? Had his throat turned septic?

I grabbed Betty's hand. "What? What is it?"

"Sit down," she said, and I sat. "Don't be in such a twitter, my lady. You know I've got some experience of the world…"

"What's that to do with Marcus?"

"I've made some mistakes, we all have, and I don't want to see you making the same ones." She shook out my cloak, and started unbuttoning my jacket. "There, do you see?"

Not Marcus, then; only her usual rambling about her past. "I'm hungry, Betty; just get my dinner, will you?"

"You're growing," she said. "I'm going to have to start corseting you tighter. It's a pity; I could push them up just so to make the most of what you've got… But it would ruin the line."

"I don't care about the line. Can I have my dressing gown? I want to go see Marcus."

"Now that," she said, "is what I'm talking about. You haven't got a mother, and your uncle doesn't care, but I'm here to tell you that you shouldn't be visiting that boy alone in his room, let alone half-dressed."

"Don't be ridiculous. Anyhow, Cora's there."

"Cora's there and he's too sick to move. But what about afterwards, I ask you?"

"Afterwards what?"

My maid stood over me, shaking her head. "*You* may be the little innocent, but that boy never was—and he's plenty old now to play the fool with you, my lady."

For a moment I wanted to hit her. But then I looked at her red round little pudding face and remembered it was only Betty, after all.

"Don't worry," I said. "Marcus is not like that, and neither am I. We talk, and we play shesh, and anyhow the duke keeps us too busy to get up to anything." I felt a rush of warmth toward her. She might not be much, but she did care about me, in her way. And so did Marcus, of course. It was funny that, when I'd been so miserable in the chaise, I had forgotten all about him.

chapter IX

THE NEXT TIME IT PLEASED THE DUKE TREMONTAINE to attend a meeting of the Council of Lords, he seemed to be the subject of more than usual interest. Whenever there was a lull in the proceedings, people would turn to look at him—pretending to be talking to a neighbor, or checking the procession of the sun out the window, but their heads turned in his direction.

What have I done now? he thought. It couldn't be Galing or Davenant, that was old business. Were they only just getting wind of the events of the Rogues' Ball? Surely not. But it was something to do with Katherine. When they met in the hallway outside, Lord Ferris himself remarked pleasantly, "A spirited girl, your young niece. The next time you have business for her in Council, you should bring her with you, though. She's a bit rough around the edges, particularly for a Tremontaine lady."

"Like the former duchess," Alec replied, "my niece professes no interest in politics." He said it automatically, because it was an easy dig at the man who had once been the duchess's lover and political mouthpiece; the rest of his mind was busy wondering what the Crescent was talking about.

"Teach her, then," said Ferris. "It will keep her off the streets, and out of other people's business."

"My niece is quite safe on the streets," the duke said frostily. "I've seen to that."

"YOUR NIECE IS PERFECTLY CHARMING," THE BLACK Rose told him when she visited him that night in Riverside, in the red velvet chamber. "Is she really your niece?"

"She's really my niece. My sister gave birth to her, a few years back."

"Then you should be more kind to her."

"*What?*" The duke dropped her leg back on the bed.

"She's very young. The young are hungry, very hungry for all sorts of things, and half the time they don't even know what they are. Do *you* know?"

"I'm perfectly kind to her," he said. "I sent her to the theatre, didn't I?"

"Do you even remember when you were her age?" The actress stroked his back with her foot. "You must have been a perfect horror. All arms and legs and rage and nameless lusts."

"That," he purred, "is precisely my point. I'm not having her go through what I went through, or what my sister did, either."

"You're a funny man." Her foot moved down his body. "You don't get this close to many women, but it would never occur to you to ask me what it is a young girl wants."

"I don't care what she wants. I know what's good for her."

"Heavens." She lay back, arms stretched over her head in the enormous bed. "Is that your mother's or your father's voice I'm hearing?" He reared up, startled. "Are you going to throw me out of bed?" she asked languidly.

"Possibly."

"I may be an actress, my lord, but I'm not stupid." He closed his fingers around her wrists, and she let him stretch his length upon her; allowing him the upper hand, she felt more secure in digging deeper. "What about the boy," she asked, "the shadowy one who follows you? He's not a relative, too, is he?"

"Leave the boy alone," he said sharply. "Nobody touches Marcus."

"Not even you?"

His fingers dug into her wrists. But he made his voice light. "I would be very much surprised if he ever asked me to. Meanwhile, you are not to bother him. Do you understand?"

She said, "When we quarreled, Lord Ferris said that I had played too many Empresses. What he meant was that I thought I was his equal. You would never say that, but you might be under the illusion that I am a creature of huge uncontrollable lusts for everything that moves, including awkward young boys."

"I never—"

"It's all right. I'm just telling you how annoying it is for me when people confuse me with my roles, that's all."

"Believe me, I have no desire to sleep with the Empress."

"Good. Do you know, I don't think you're mad at all."

"Stick around."

"I will."

"And tell me more," he said, "about Lord Ferris."

Sweetest Katherine, my One True Friend—

How long it seems since we were girls together, innocently comparing beaux at the Tr——Ball! How I treasure our time together! I still have the feather I wore in my hair that night—some might call it a plume—but its lustre is sadly faded—or perhaps 'tis the dullness of mine eye that makes it seem so. I am sure that if you saw me now, you would not look twice—for my eyes are red with perpetual weeping—and yet, such is the virtue of your eyes that I know you would see into my heart as you have always done, and view with kindness the crushed flower hiding there. Oh, when I think of him I feel vile and disgusting! But then I picture your dear face, flushed with righteous wrath, and it is as if your angry tears can wash away my stain.

Like Stella at the races, I see much but say little—and I believe that, like Fabian, you keep faith with me despite appearances. Oh, do let me hear from you! If only to tell me that you are well, and remember your loving—

A F-L

The handwriting was large and loopy and violet, and it just about broke my heart. But what could I do? I'd challenged Lord Ferris, and he'd refused me. Poor Artemisia! I'd hoped at least the challenge would frighten the Crescent into crying off, but it hadn't done even that. Nevertheless, she must be answered. I dashed off a reply.

Lady S—

Know that you and your grievance, though little talked on, are far from forgotten. I watch and wait, and will prevail.

Have you seen the play yet?

Your assured friend,

I sealed it with candlewax and stuffed it in my jacket, and set out to find my delivery boy. But in the hallway I met Marcus, capped and booted and mufflered, a handkerchief in his fist.

"It's the chairs," he snuffled. "He wants to go see the chairs."

"What are you doing out of bed?"

"I'm bored. I want to see them, too."

"What chairs?"

"New ones." He coughed. "New design. It's a fine day. Like spring. We're walking. Want to come?"

"Love to."

So the fine springlike day found the three of us sloshing through the fine Riverside mud on our way to a shop that would have been more than happy to bring the chairs to us if we'd been content to stay indoors. Ever since my trip to the theatre, I'd been taking more care to dress well when I went out; if people saw me, I wanted them to see someone who mattered. Today I wore my green suit, though not my velvet cloak, with an embroidered scabbard and a shirt whose cuffs were trimmed with lace.

My uncle noticed. "Pretty," he said, "but hardly practical. You're my swordsman, not my maid of honor. Steel catches on lace; Richard would never wear it. If it comes to a fight, now, you'll tuck your cuffs under. I know you're a young girl full of nameless lusts involving fashion, but you don't want to die of vanity your next fight. Whenever that may be." He looked around and shrugged. "It's a wonder you've gone unchallenged, after your triumph at Sabina's ball. In the old days, they would have been lined up around the block to try you, the bright new blade in town. No one has any ambition anymore—they just want to sit on their nicely muscled asses drawing nobles' pay to defend the indefensible."

"I'm in your household," I pointed out before he could say any more about swordsmen's anatomy. "They might be afraid a challenge to me is an insult to you."

"Riverside." He sighed gustily, and stepped around an indescribable pile of something that had emerged from the melted snow. "It's not what it was."

"Whose fault is that?" Marcus muttered. We crossed the Bridge, and picked up a couple more guards at the Tremontaine postern.

I had a thought. "But," I asked, "if I *were* to maybe challenge someone, challenge him on my own, I mean, without your authority—would I be able to do that?"

The duke stopped in the middle of the street. Marcus and the guards and I stopped with him and narrowly missed being run over by a carriage that was barreling up behind us. Our retainers and the carriage lackeys had it out while His Grace of Tremontaine regarded me fixedly from above.

"Such as?" he asked. "What sort of hypothetical person were you hypothetically thinking of maybe challenging?" I couldn't say anything. "Not some bravo," the duke hypothesized, "in a tavern brawl or street fight…not your style. Those are boys' games."

"Do you think," I asked, momentarily distracted, "they don't even want to fight me? They think, because I'm a girl, I'm not even worth bothering with? Or is it just because I'm related?"

"I don't know," the duke said. Behind us the two factions were close to blows. "Tremontaine makes place for no one!" shouted Ralph, our man. That was certainly true. The duke was placidly ignoring the whole fracas. "But I would very much prefer that you not spill your blood for anything trivial."

"It's not trivial!" I blurted out.

"My Lord of Tremontaine!" a well-bred voice called from the carriage. "If you please! I have a very sick rabbit in here!"

"A rabbit?" said Marcus. "May I see?"

"Bloody Furnival and his stupid pets," the duke growled. "It bites. And he said it's diseased. What are you all doing, standing in the middle of the street—you're supposed to be protecting me, not encouraging nobles with unnatural tastes to run me down!"

But he did not forget.

We went and saw the chairs, and he ordered a dozen, all curvy and strange—very modern, he said approvingly—and we were going to stop at White's for chocolate when he suddenly said, "No, let's go on to Tremontaine House. I want to see the room they'll go in, while it's fresh in my mind. Do you know," he said cheerfully as we trudged on up the Hill, "maybe I should have the whole room redone to match them? Soften the angles of the walls, with molding, maybe, so it's all nothing but curves? That would help take the curse off the place."

We were passing the street that Lucius Perry's sweetheart lived on. I glanced over at Marcus to see if he'd catch my eye, and I didn't like what I

saw. My friend's face was pale, his eyes were bleary and his forehead looked damp. I sidled over to him. "Go home," I said.

Marcus coughed. "We're almost there."

"All right, but when we get to Tremontaine House, you're going straight to bed." He didn't have the strength to do anything but nod, and when we hit a steep part, he actually took my arm.

Astonishingly, Tremontaine House was ready to receive us. Marcus went upstairs to collapse on clean sheets. The staff set a table in the pretty room overlooking the garden, and the duke and I sat down there to a small collation of chocolate and biscuits, dried fruit and nuts. Outside the tall windows, the blooming witch hazel and forsythia made streaks of bright color against the general gloom.

"Almost spring," my uncle remarked. "Riverside is turning into a swamp already. We'll bring the household back up here soon."

Just when I'd gotten used to Riverside, he wanted to move me again. It figured. "It's so quiet up here," I said. "Kind of boring, don't you think?"

"I do my best," he drawled, "to enliven it. Tell me, Katherine: does this hypothetical challenge of yours involve one of the neighbors up here?"

I sloshed chocolate all over my saucer. "What challenge?"

"The one everybody in the city appears to know about but me."

"That isn't so! No one knows about it except Lord—" I felt myself flush with the embarrassment of having walked right into his trap. "I was very discreet," I added lamely.

"Discreet is good," my uncle said encouragingly. He was leaning across the table toward me, like a tutor trying to help me with my arithmetic. "Now, then, where does he live?"

"I don't know, exactly."

"You can't fight him if you can't find him, Katherine."

"I can find him."

"I can help—discreetly, of course. This is, as you say, your fight. What's the cause?"

"It's—personal."

His whole body tightened like a string that had been pulled. "How personal? Has someone offered you insult?"

He was so like a father in a book, I couldn't help smiling. "Please," I said as airily as possible, "I can manage."

"Of course you can, I've seen to that. But if anyone has done anything, anything *bad* to you, rest assured that I—"

It was his usual polished hauteur, all drawly and annoying, but I paid attention and saw that his green eyes were glittering and very fierce. I actually reached across the table and touched his hand. "Nothing like that. I'm fine. It's for someone else, a friend."

He looked, if anything, fiercer. "Not your friend Marcus?"

"Marcus? Of course not. Someone else. I can't tell you, though. It's a secret."

The duke nearly choked on his chocolate. "My dear! I've got more secrets than you've got teeth in your mouth. Believe me, I can keep a secret." I didn't say anything. "Never mind," he said, "I can find out. Will you tell me who it is you're challenging, or do I have to lock you in your room and feed you on bread and water 'til I starve it out of you?"

"It doesn't matter," I said glumly. "He refused me."

My uncle put down his cup. "Hold on. You issued a public challenge to a noble of this city, and he turned you down?"

"It wasn't very public. Just one or two other men there, and then he took me aside and told me not to be silly. I could kill him just for that. He wasn't taking me seriously at all. He kept thinking I'd come from you, even though I told him I hadn't."

My uncle raised his eyebrows, and then his face broke into a slow, delighted grin. "It's Ferris," he said. "You've challenged the Crescent Chancellor. No wonder he never comes to see me anymore."

"He's not—is he a friend of yours?" I hadn't thought of that. I'd never seen Lord Ferris at any of Tremontaine's gatherings, but clearly he didn't have much self-control when it came to the kinds of things the duke didn't either, so maybe…

"The ways in which Ferris is no friend to me are beyond counting. That goes for Tremontaine in general: he's got a grudge against the lot of us; he'll kill you if he thinks he can. Fortunately I know some of his secrets, so he's chary of us. Old ones, and new ones, too. What's the latest? What has he done to this friend of yours?"

"I can't tell you," I said miserably. "It's too shameful. And it isn't my secret. It's a question of honor."

My uncle took a deep breath. "Look. Did you tell Ferris what the challenge was about?"

"Of course I did. He did it!—the thing. The thing I'm challenging him about."

"La, la." My uncle shook his head sadly. "She'll tell Lord Ferris what she won't tell me." His eyes met mine. He looked serious all of a sudden. "There are quite a few things Ferris has to be ashamed about. One of them concerns money. One of them concerns the Black Rose." The mention of the actress startled me. My uncle watched me for a moment, and then, satisfied that the challenge did not concern her, went on, "Now, Ferris doesn't know I know about either of those things, not yet. He won't be pleased when he finds out, assuming he ever does. But I can take care of myself; indeed, knowing things about him can be very useful to me. For you, though…for you, it's different. If you know something bad about him that no one else knows, he isn't going to feel entirely safe around you. And a worried Ferris can turn very nasty."

My uncle leaned back in his chair; I thought of a tutor again, as he raised his chin to the ceiling. "Think of secrets," he told me, "as being like money. The more you have—of other people's, I mean—the richer you are, and the more likely to be able to afford something you want when you really need it. Now, I'm the head of the family, which means I hold most of the family fortune: houses, land…and secrets. You are a junior member, and you hold—one. Give it to me, and you add to the family fortunes. Keep it, and I'm going to set a guard on you. Just in case the Crescent Chancellor decides he'd rather you didn't tell anyone after all."

I stared down at my knuckles. I didn't think he was bluffing. He was really worried.

"If I tell you," I said, "do you promise not to tell anyone else?"

My uncle nodded.

"And if you think it's stupid, you won't lock me in my room and refuse to let me fight?"

He looked at the ceiling. "Good question. Will I? Let's say I won't, this time."

"What you were saying before," I muttered, "when you thought it might be me? It wasn't me; it was someone else."

"Forgive my bluntness, but I need to get this straight: Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris, raped a girl, and now you want to kill him for it?"

"I'm not sure I'm going to kill him. He has to admit it was wrong, and beg her forgiveness."

"Are you in love with her yourself?"

I could feel myself turning an interesting color. But I wasn't going to give way to him now. I said, "Is that all you can think about?"

"Not all. I just wanted to make sure."

"Well, it's not the point. The point is, he did this awful thing against her will, and he doesn't care, and her family doesn't care—they all want her to get married to him anyway, and she doesn't want to, and nobody's going to do anything about it if I don't!"

"Ahhh." The duke nodded in satisfaction. "The little Fitz-Levi." He shook his head mournfully. "Oh, Ferris. Those years in Arkenvelt have coarsened you, I fear, and given you a trader's soul: tasting the wares before the final sale." He said to me, "You are quite right to call him out. That's no way to behave, with him thinking he can have whatever he wants whenever he wants it. Let him learn some humility first. It's a lesson he's got long a-coming; he's always treated women badly, and only the one time did we make him pay for it." Lost inside a memory, the duke cut a long spiral of apple peel; then he looked up and said, "He's not young, you know. He can't go on like this forever. Tell your little friend to do her utmost, and maybe he'll drop dead on his wedding night."

I said, "That's disgusting. Aren't you listening? She doesn't want to marry him."

"You're not thinking it through," he said at his most superciliously annoying. "She's damaged goods. Now that she's ruined, marriage to Ferris is the only safe course open to her."

"How can you say that," I hissed, "you of all people? How can you say it's *safe* for her? To live for the rest of her life with someone who could do something like that?" I found that I had risen to my feet and was leaning over the table glaring at him. "Someone *you* don't even like?"

"Oh, thank you," he said dryly. "Sit down, please. I only meant, safe in the eyes of the world. I didn't say I approved. You should know that—you, of all people."

But I did not sit down. "Then *do* something," I said. "Why don't you *do* something, if it matters to you so much? The truth is, you don't care about her. You don't care about any of us, and you're not going to do anything. But I do, and I will."

His knuckles were very white against the table's rim. I was afraid I'd gone too far. But his voice, when he spoke, was measured and calm. "Let me understand you clearly," he said, as though testing a mathematical proof. "You

are going to cry challenge against Lord Ferris, not merely to avenge a wrong, but so that this girl need not marry against her will?"

"I'm going to challenge him because you can't treat people that way. No one seems to realize it; no one seems to care. *He* certainly doesn't. He thinks he owns her already, and her parents do, too—and even you. It makes me sick."

My uncle was looking up at me with the strangest expression, as if he were going to cry, if such a thing were possible. What he said next was even more confusing: "Katherine?" There was a curious smile on his face, as if he were telling himself a story that he liked very much. "What do you want for your birthday?"

What did I want? He was the Duke Tremontaine. There was a lot he could give me. There was a lot he had taken from me, too. Why was he asking me this now, all of a sudden? I didn't know what to say. "I'll think about it."

"Good enough. Now sit down. You're right. I'm not going to do anything. I'm going to let you do it." I sat. "So." He was all business now. "You challenged Ferris once, but he did not accept. Neither did you revoke the challenge. So as far as he knows, you could appear any day with a skewer to his gut. He won't like that."

"I told him he could apologize to her."

The duke smiled. "Oh, *that* will definitely happen. When the river boils over. But that's not the point anymore."

"Why not? He's insulted her honor. It isn't as if girls don't have any."

"Have you asked yourself why he doesn't want a fight? And why he's so insistent that the marriage go forward despite your friend's objections?" He held up a hand. "Don't start. I'm not that coarse; I'm sure he had a lovely time wherever he did it with her, but it's not like Ferris to think with his—ah, his privates. He did it to secure the wedding. He did it to secure the funds."

"Isn't he rich already?"

The duke bisected an apple with the paring knife. "Nope. That's his little secret—the one I have, the one he must be afraid is going to come out."

"How do you know?"

"I know it because…people tell me things they shouldn't." He took a bite from the apple and grinned. "Sometimes I pay them to. Terrible. Trust no one; or if you do, try not to have any secrets."

"I don't understand."

"Ferris always liked being twisty. Overcomplication has been his downfall in the past. Before you were born, he tried to double-cross your great-grandmother—that's her, there on the wall." He pointed to the glorious lady in grey silk, the portrait with the flamingo mallet I had so admired. "It was my pleasure to ruin him the first time, and get him sent to Arkenvelt. From which he returned about ten years ago, laden with furs which he turned into cash, and so was able to buy his way back into society, a good marriage and back up the rungs of the Council of Lords to his present glorious position. But he never had much land, what he's got is mortgaged to the hilt, and now he's nearly out of cash. He has nothing left to fall back on except what he can create for himself. It's perfectly obvious: every bill he supports, every vote he casts is designed to feather his own nest—taxing the landowners, encouraging trade…It makes him look progressive—Karleigh's cronies just hate him, but for all the wrong reasons.

"Politics. I'm boring you. I should start sending you to Council meetings—then you'd know what boredom is. But listen: Ferris needs this marriage. And he needs you not to mess it up. You're lucky he's not taking you too seriously, or he would have had you knifed on the street."

I felt cold. "But that's dishonorable!"

"Ferris has no more real sense of honor than that doorknob. Honor is a tool he uses to manipulate others. Challenge him soon. Do it right; do it in public with everyone watching. Then he can't weasel out. Do you want to rid us all of him forever, or give him time to find a swordsman to take the challenge for him?"

"I don't think I should kill him."

"Probably not. Killing a noble in challenge means it goes to the Court of Honor, and then everything would come out. Either that, or I'd have to step forward and claim the challenge myself, and I'm not really interested in the eternal gratitude of the Fitz-Levis. No, you just fight his champion, and refuse to answer any questions after. Say it was a private affair of honor. People will draw their own conclusions, but with any luck they'll get it wrong, and you'll keep your friend's name out of it. But do it by the book, and do it soon."

"How soon?"

"Because I am your uncle and I have many employees, I will make it my business to learn Lord Ferris's schedule for tomorrow and the next day. That soon."

I nodded.

The duke rose. "Oh, and Katherine…"

"Yes, uncle?"

"Where's Marcus?"

"In bed. He's sick again."

"Well, never mind; I'll just write a letter and send it down to Riverside, and then you can ask Marcus where—oh, never mind; I can find the stuff myself."

It was the last time I saw him sober that night.

I went up to make sure Marcus was all right. He was dozing in bed. His room here was smaller than the one in the Riverside house, but it was cozy, with a fire lit and rain beginning to patter against the windows. He opened his eyes when I came in, and I sent for some broth for him and watched him drink it.

It was comforting just to sit with him in silence. There was so much I couldn't tell him now, about Lord Ferris and Artemisia and what the duke had said to me. But Marcus and I had secrets of our own.

"We can't just keep calling her 'Lucius Perry's friend,'" I said aloud.

"Ah." Marcus smiled. "We don't have to. I found out her name."

"How did you…?"

"I do get out occasionally, you know." He sounded like the duke, only with such a bad cough I didn't have the heart to deny him his triumph.

"All right, tell me."

"Her name is Teresa Grey."

"Who told you?"

"No one. I read it on a letter she left lying on a table."

"You went into her studio?!"

"Don't be an idiot. I went over the wall again. She wasn't there, so I went right up to the window and saw it."

"I can't believe you went without me."

"I would have taken you if I'd been able to find you. But you've been hard to find these days. Anyway, it wasn't for long."

I did not tell him that I had gone there without him, too, the day of the theatre. What was there to tell, really? I hadn't seen any letters, just lurked on the street and followed Lucius Perry up the Hill to a gate I'd been scared to go through. I hadn't told Marcus about the theatre, either, or the Black Rose, or anything. I owed him. And so I said, "All right. You are remarkable. Teresa Grey. I like that name."

Marcus lay back and closed his eyes. “Isn’t it lovely, Katie?”

“What?”

“Knowing something *he* doesn’t know.”

“What if he does know?”

“He doesn’t. I’d bet on it.”

I giggled. “Maybe we should offer to sell him the information. He likes secrets.”

“Not this one. This one’s ours.”

“Ours and Teresa Grey’s.” My friend’s eyes were shut; he looked as if he were dreaming already. Softly I said, “He’d be furious if he knew we were doing this.”

“He doesn’t own us. He’s the Duke Tremontaine, he’s not the king of the entire world.”

“What if he finds out?”

“He won’t.”

“And we won’t tell him, will we?”

When Marcus opened his eyes, they were brown and disarming and utterly frank. “I see no reason to. Do you?”

I tucked his blanket back in. “None whatsoever. Good night.”

I passed the duke’s study. The hall smelt of a peculiar, sweet smoke; I went past quickly. I could hear him crashing around in there, calling for Marcus. I went downstairs and found a footman who could take care of him, and the staff gave me some hot soup and tried to pump me for gossip from the Riverside house, so I went back upstairs through the dark and empty house, and found myself standing in front of the doors with the wet rabbits on them. Funny to think about the first time I’d seen them, with Betty nervous beside me, and me nervous clutching my short cloak to hide my legs. And Master Venturus waiting behind the door, to teach me how not hold sword. And me maybe having already met Marcus, but not knowing really who he was, and still dreaming of sweeping down staircases in a ballgown…It was the same day I ran away to see Artemisia. I had not yet picked up a sword. I had not met Richard St Vier.

I went into the dark room; the mirrors gave it what glow there was, but I didn’t need to see much. I thought of Highcombe, of the man practicing there with no opponent, who might be practicing now. I ran through the opening moves of a fight, any fight, and then I started thinking about what he would do next, and moved to counter him.

IN THE MORNING, WHEN I WENT TO PUT MY JACKET back on, I found my note to Artemisia still tucked up inside it. I opened it up and sat down and added these words:

Sweetest Lady Stella,

A challenge has been issued, and awaits but the turning of the tide to bear a bitter fruit—bitter for some, but sweet, I hope, to your tongue, and a balm to your sad eyes. I told you he'd regret it, and I wasn't joking. Be of good courage—hold fast, and keep faith, for I will meet his champion on the field of battle, and blot out your stain with his blood.

Not Fabian, but True and Faithful

TYRIAN

I signed it with a flourish, and sealed it with several blobs of the duke's best wax.

Part IV

CHALLENGE

chapter I

MARCUS WAS BETTER THE NEXT DAY, BUT THE duke was badly hung over and didn't want anyone near him whom he could hear breathing. I felt jittery about the challenge, jittery about the letter I'd written to Artemisia (which I'd sent by the simple expedient of charging one of the Tremontaine House servants to safely deliver it to her maid). I didn't want Marcus to ask why. To distract us both, I proposed a little stroll down to what I jauntily referred to as "Lucius Perry's Love Nest."

To our silent delight, Perry was there, too. He was sitting on the sofa in a loose dressing gown, drinking chocolate and watching Teresa paint. He must have spent the night: the gown was a flowered print of yellow-gold on a dusky green that looked wonderful with her auburn hair, but didn't do a thing for his complexion. Knowing he was wrapped up in one of her gowns, and that he was slight enough to fit in it, made me feel tremendously tender toward them both.

It was a very domestic scene. We watched as Perry reached for more chocolate, and then he felt in the pocket of the gown and pulled out a folded paper, its seal broken, and looked hard at it.

Teresa Grey had gotten a letter, too.

ANOTHER ONE?"

"Don't open it," she said swiftly. "It's just more nonsense: ravings and accusations, pleading and boasting…I shouldn't even break the seals anymore. I should just throw them in the fire." Her fingers closed on his, forbidding him the paper.

"Why do they let him?"

"They don't *let* him, Lucius, they force him to write. He doesn't really want me. They egg him on, they keep him in drink until he's all fired up and turns out his pages. I doubt he remembers a day later what he's done."

"But why? Why won't they let you go?"

"Cruelty, I suppose. And oddly enough, I'm still their last best hope for an heir. If the marriage is dissolved, they'd never find anyone else to take him as he is now."

Perry's face contorted with revulsion. "An heir."

"Well, we tried," she said. "Before I left, we tried."

"All right, that's it." He got up from the couch, hitching up his robe. "I'm an idiot. I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner. It's so much simpler, really."

"What is?"

"I'm going to kill him."

"You can't kill Roderick!"

"Yes, I can. It's simple." He put one foot up on the windowsill, looking back over his shoulder. "I know exactly how it's done. Find a swordsman, pay him to challenge poor Roderick to the death without warning, and *poof!* No more letters. No more husband. And you are free to choose…" he opened his robe "…another." She giggled, and came to his arms. He closed the robe around them both. "Choose me," he murmured, feeling her settle against him.

"No," she murmured. He felt her smile against his neck.

"Or not," he added agreeably. "You'll be free, at any rate."

"But really, Lucius, you mustn't do it. You mustn't think of it."

"Oh?" He drew back, wrapping the robe around himself. "Do you harbor still some tenderness for this forest god of yours?"

"Don't be disgusting. I harbor some desire to keep my privacy intact, and to keep you out of prison."

"Prison? For what?"

"For *this*, Lucius!" she said angrily. "For playing with their property! I married their son; in the eyes of the law, I'm their property yet. Don't you understand that?"

"The laws of challenge—"

"Yes, yes, I know. Your swordsman will slay him and then you'll stand up in the Court of Honor and proudly tell everyone why you killed their son. And the Lords Justiciar will say, 'Well, that's all right, then, never mind; just take her and be happy.' Is that what you're thinking?"

"I'll keep it private. If I must, I'll pay the swordsman to lie."

"And Roddy's family will swoop in with the truth. For all I know they've got spies on me already, and are just saving the juicy facts until they need them—which is to say, in case I ever try anything."

"But—"

"This isn't a game to me: the hiding, the being secret. I'm not doing it for fun, like you. If our liaison became public—and I assure you, if you challenge

Roderick and kill him, it will be—then all that still makes my life tolerable will be taken from me in the wake of the ensuing scandal."

"You're a scandal already. You left your husband, you write trash for a living—"

"It isn't trash. And that's a secret. All everyone knows is that I live on the kindness of others, in a house provided by a sympathetic cousin. I make my pin money from friends who buy my china painting. That's the life I live, and the world will put up with it as long as they don't know any other."

"*I* know it," he said quietly.

"Yes. You do know. And I know yours."

He smiled. "Do you think that's why we get along so well?"

"You love your secrets. I merely require mine. It is why I trust you, though."

"You can trust me with anything."

"Can I trust you to be careful? You love danger, you love the sense that you could be caught at any time." In answer, he kissed her hand, bowing low. She touched his hair. "You are my only luxury, Lucius. So far, the cost hasn't been too high. Which is why there will be no challenge. Not from you."

He straightened. "I am a noble of the House of Perry. I have the right to call challenge where honor has been offended."

"Stop playing," she said irritably. "If you won't respect my secrets, have a thought to yours. Challenge him, and they will surely come out. You would hate it, you know you would. But if self-sacrifice is your current dangerous passion, spare a thought for how I'd feel watching them spend my dowry on their petty persecution of us both."

"At least you'd get your dowry back in the end."

"You think so? You've never hired lawyers, have you? And how would the rest of the noble House of Perry feel? Your family would cast you off, Lucius, they'd have to. Even if you're enjoying the image of yourself as my noble champion, this is one role I won't let you try out."

"It doesn't matter," he said softly. "It's not as if I can't support us both."

"Oh, lovely," she said, choking back angry tears. "You'll pay for our room and board by selling your body in Riverside. I'd like that. And when you can't work, I'll support you painting flowers on china and writing drama for whatever theatre will take it as long as they can pretend they don't know who it came from…"

"Intolerable," he growled, "the lot of them. I'll start with him, and then I'll pick them off, one by one, see if I don't."

"You might kill my husband with some justice," she said gently, "for his offenses against me. You cannot kill them all, my Lucius. And you would have to kill them all, to make the world a safe place for the likes of us."

"*He* talks like that, sometimes," Lucius Perry said thoughtfully. "When he talks to me at all."

"*No.*" She seized his wrist in her strong fingers. "Stop thinking what you're thinking. I'm not having it."

"He likes me. He says I'm not a hypocrite. I think he'd like you."

"Lucius, no."

"What's the point of having the Duke Tremontaine as a patron, if he can't do me any real good when I need him?"

"You haven't thought it through," she said, but she didn't sound annoyed. Amused, maybe, and a little sad. "He's not your patron, and he doesn't mean you any good. He has you for the same reason I do; because you're such a lovely secret."

"I'm serious," Lucius Perry said. "I would take on the world for you."

"I believe you." She kissed him. "And I'm not going to let you."

MARCUS SNEEZED.

"Let's go home," I said. "I have to practice."

chapter II

"A CHALLENGE HAS BEEN ISSUED." ROBERT FITZ-LEVI flicked at the paper with well-manicured hand. "My dear sister, what does this mean?"

Artemisia glared at her brother across her room, not even rising from the chair she was sunk in, her tangled embroidery on her lap. "It means, my dear brother, that you have been reading my private correspondence without asking."

"Mother read it. She asked me to come and speak with you."

Artemisia sat up straight, her arms on the chair. "What have you to say, then, Robert?"

Robert drew a deep breath, went to the window, and then let it out and turned to her. "Do you know what I really want to say? I want to say that I wish you'd grow up and stop behaving like the queen in some tragedy. You made a stupid error, and now you refuse to admit it and face the consequences. Listen, Artie, do you have any idea how lucky you are?"

"*Lucky?* Lucky to be forced against my will?"

"By your intended, just a few weeks before your wedding night. What's the difference?"

She said, "You make me sick. I thought you'd understand, but you're on *their* side now."

He shouted, "I'm on *your* side, but you're just too stupid to see it!"

"If you really cared for me, you'd fight for me! You'd be out there defending my honor, instead of sucking up to Father so he'll raise your allowance so you and your stupid friends can hire swordsmen to fight over women you—you aren't even related to."

"If you weren't such a romantic bubble-headed idiot, you'd know that your honor isn't compromised unless this gets out."

"Robert," she said. "My honor was compromised the moment that monster laid a hand on me. If you don't see that, there's others who do."

"Enough!" he said, brandishing the letter heavy with blobs of sealing wax. "Who is this *Tyrian*?"

"A friend. A true friend, and willing to fight for me."

"My god," he groaned. "How many of them are there? It's not enough that you drag Ferris off to some sleazy ball for your fun, but now you've got some punk swordsman on your string as well?"

His sister threw the nearest thing to hand, a small table. "How dare you? I'll have her kill you next, see if I don't!"

"You've hired a *woman* to kill Lord Ferris?"

"She's a girl, a girl like me. She's brave and bold and true, and no one could ever make her do a thing that she despises, or harm the innocent. She's not one of your swaggering bullies who fight for money; she's a *real* swordsman. Like Fabian."

"Oh, lord." Her brother looked pale. He put his hand against the wall, oblivious that it covered a frolicking nymph. "Who's Fab—"

"Never mind about Fabian." A tight-lipped Lady Fitz-Levi had entered the room. "That's quite enough nonsense. I don't know where you managed to meet this heroic young lady, but unless you're planning to marry *her*, you'd better tell her to keep her heroics to herself, and leave us all alone. Here, put this on." She held up a gown of soft pink silk, ruffled to perfection.

"I *hate* pink."

"It will give you color, which you sadly lack. Dorrie—" Artemisia's maid appeared. "The hair, please."

"What—"

"Sit still, you'll knot it."

"I don't—"

"Daughter, be still. You will be made presentable, and you will go out. Whether or not you enjoy yourself is entirely up to you, but I urge you to try. (Robert, turn your back.) All the city knows is that you've been ill and fretful, and that Lord Ferris is pining for you. (No, Dorrie, the pearls.) Before we leave, you will write to your heroic friend, telling her she is on no account to make a fuss of any kind."

"It's not a 'fuss,' Mama," Artemisia protested, even as she felt the cool weight of the pearls settle around her neck. "It's a challenge, for my honor."

"Your 'honor' is no one's business but ours, child. More particularly, honor is the business of men."

"But men are supposed to fight for a woman's honor. If Papa and Robert —"

"If your father and brother feel insulted, of course they will fight for you; isn't that so, Robbie?"

"Naturally, Mama. How could I do otherwise?"

"There, you see? (The curls a little higher—where is the butterfly pin?) Your honor is tarnished only if theirs is. And we have all made very sure that

there is no breath of scandal, so no tarnish. (Don't tight-lace, Dorrie, she's thin enough as is.) Do you understand, now, dear?"

"Do try, Artie," her brother added encouragingly. "You've always been game. I'm sorry what I said about your champion before—you see, I do take your honor most seriously, on my word I do. I'm your brother, I'm supposed to protect you. I know it's been tough on you, old girl, but you must realize we care a lot for you. While you've been up here soaking your handkerchiefs, we've been making sure there's nothing *to* fight about. Do you see?"

"I think so."

"Of course she does. She knows how much we love her and want what's best for her." Lady Fitz-Levi pinched her daughter's cheeks evenly, to bring out the glow. "Oh, look at her; doesn't she look pretty?"

"A picture, madam."

"Just so. We can all be proud of our little girl, and I know you will never do anything to make us feel otherwise. Now, which slippers do you like, the rosettes with the little heels, or the satin grey?"

"I wore those last year."

"The rose, then. Stand up. Yes, you're quite right about the heels, dear. The line is better so. Turn around. Robert, isn't she a picture? Oh, Dorrie, look at that ruffle, it's uneven—get your sewing kit, quickly. Yes, Kirk, what is it?"

"The carriage, my lady."

"Dear me, already? I'll just go change my gown—no one minds what I look like—and you sit and write that note."

"But Mama—"

Covered in a muslin robe to protect her toilette, Artemisia wrote:

Dearest Fabian,

All is lost. My ruin is complete. My kind parents and brother have explained it all to me. There is no hope. Consider me as one dead and lost to the world. I will always remember you fondly, and will never forget what you were willing to do to save your—

Artemisia

"Hmph." Lady Fitz-Levi read it over. "That will do. To whom is it addressed? Come, tell me—do not make me pump the servants for

information, for I know they have delivered others."

"To—to Lady Katherine Talbert. At Tremontaine House."

"Oh…my…god," her brother said feelingly.

LITTLE WAS SAID IN THE CARRIAGE, BUT WHEN Artemisia's mother was looking out the window, her brother passed her a flask and Lady Fitz-Levi pretended not to notice.

"A little afternoon musicale," said her mother soothingly, "at your friends the Godwins. Your dear Lydia will be there, that will be nice for you. She has written you almost every day, you know."

"I know."

"And there will be no need to say much; just listen to the music, nod and smile, very simple."

"Will—will *he* be there?"

"Oh, lord, child, how do I know? He doesn't send me his comings and goings."

"Don't worry, sis." Her brother squeezed her hand. "If he offends you in public in any way, I'll fight him for sure."

"Will you, Robbie?" she whispered. "Promise? If he's there and he tries to get me alone, you won't let me out of your sight, promise?"

"'Course I do. You're safe as Nanny's Hedgehog."

She smiled at the childhood memory, and allowed herself to settle back a little.

EVERYONE AT THE GODWIN PARTY WAS CAREFULLY pleased to see her. Lydia practically crushed all her ruffles in a fierce embrace, and whispered, "You look divine! All pale and interesting. I mustn't let Armand catch sight of you; he'll think me a pig by comparison."

Her cousin Lucius was there, too, impeccably dressed as always. He took her hand and bowed and said, "It's good to see you well," but that was all. She saw her old beau Gregory, Lord Talbert, across the room flirting with an older woman, and wondered for a moment what would have happened if she had betrothed herself to him, and wished him well.

She sat on a velvet-covered love seat, wedged between her mother and her brother, and listened to two women playing flute and harp. The sun was coming in the tall windows overlooking the gardens. Lydia and Armand sat between them, a curtain half-pulled across them to disguise the fact that they were holding hands.

When *he* came in, she knew it.

She felt it on the back of her neck, a disturbance of the air, the disturbance of his gaze. The music didn't stop. She gripped the edge of Robert's jacket. She thought she could smell him, over the other people and the hothouse flowers. She found her handkerchief and a vial of geranium scent and applied some and took deep breaths through the linen, although it smelt far too sweet.

She prayed for the music never to end, but then it did. People applauded; she balled her handkerchief in her palm and did so, too. Her mother poked her; she sat up straight, and prepared to greet her promised bridegroom.

Lord Ferris was exactly as she had first met him: well dressed, well groomed, well spoken. He greeted her and her family with just the right degree of civility and warmth. Her mother was flirting like a fool; Robert was trying to be smooth and adult, and sounding prissy instead. Only Lord Ferris was acting normal: charming and considerate, just this side of conspiratorial where she was concerned, as though he shared her opinion of her family, and wanted her to know that he was being good.

"Are you feeling faint?" he asked Artemisia, all intimate concern. He leaned in so close to her that she could see the pores of his face. "Let me get you a glass of something."

Artemisia felt like some actress in a play, and in a sense she was: anyone in the room could be watching her. Whatever she might feel about her family, she would not disgrace *herself*. But her hand was shaking, she couldn't help it. The only way she was going to get through this was to be Stella—Stella at the country house when Mangrove comes to visit…Stella, carrying Fabian's child, but to let Mangrove know could mean both their deaths, and so she dances and laughs and flirts with a surprised young cousin, to the disgust of Tyrian, who she doesn't know is there to guard her…and in a feat of bravado, she goes to the races and rides her cousin's horse to victory… Fortunately, no dancing would be expected here, or racing either, and Robert

made a poor excuse for loyal Tyrian—but she drew in a deep breath, and another, and her hand stopped shaking.

Lord Ferris returned with lemon water. "Are you enjoying the music?" he asked. For once, her mother's tendency to answer for her was a blessing. But then he proposed to sit down next to her, and her mother's skirts rustled as she shifted aside to let him. Artemisia was looking at the floor, thinking, It won't be so bad if I can't see him…

And then the most marvelous thing in the world happened: a pair of shoes appeared. Small shoes, on a girl's small feet, but cut in a boy's pattern, and above them were fine ankles in heavy stockings that met with breeches just below the knee, and the point of a sword hanging by them, surrounded by green velvet with a gold tassel.

"I came as soon as I could," said Katherine Talbert.

"Oh!" Artemisia gasped in admiration. "Don't you look wonderful!"

"Armed, and with a challenge." Lord Ferris sighed. "Lady Godwin may not thank you for interrupting her musicale."

"I am to convey my regrets to Lady Godwin."

"By all means do so," Lord Ferris said. He was still standing. He looked down at her with his good eye. "She is over by the window, the lady in blue."

"I will," Katherine replied, "when we have finished our business, Lord Ferris. Would you like to step outside?"

The girl with her long hair tied back, dressed in a man's suit and carrying a sword, had not joined the Godwins' guests unnoticed. Artemisia could feel the tension in Ferris's stance as the ring of interested onlookers tightened around them. And she watched him make utterly the wrong choice when he replied to Katherine Talbert, "I have no business with you."

"That isn't true," Katherine said clearly. "I challenged you weeks ago, and as far as I know, you have not withdrawn the offense."

On either side of her, Artemisia's mother clutched her hand, and her brother sat poised to do something. Artemisia admired the way Katherine wasn't looking at her, and she enjoyed the preposterous sight the girl made in the music room. If Artemisia had known that she was grinning, she would have hidden it—but it had been so long since she had smiled with all her heart that Artemisia Fitz-Levi only knew that she was happy.

"Oh. So you did. Some time ago." Ferris chuckled. "I imagined, my dear, that *you* had withdrawn, having taken my advice and thought better of it."

"Well, I haven't. So now I must ask you: will you take the fight yourself, or do you have a champion?"

The crowd had been silent. Now Michael, Lord Godwin, resplendent in blue and gold, stepped forward saying, "Ferris, my house swordsman is of course at your disposal."

"You're very kind, Godwin, but I have a man with me, if someone will but send for him."

Lord Godwin looked at the newcomer, and then he looked again. "You are Tremontaine's niece?"

"I'm afraid so. But he's not the challenger, you're not to think he is. I'm—I'm fighting on another's behalf. Someone Lord Ferris has deeply offended."

"I understand," said Michael Godwin gravely.

Lady Godwin put her hand on her husband's arm. "There's to be no fighting in the music room. Out in the courtyard, I think, and people can watch from the steps."

"What about the garden?"

"Too muddy, still, I think, don't you?"

Artemisia's mother tried to hold her back, but she thrust her way to the very front, where the balustrade overlooked the stone courtyard of the Godwin townhouse. Her heart was throbbing not unpleasantly in her chest, and in her throat. She wished Lydia were by her side, but Lydia was back against a pillar with Armand Lindley's protective arm around her.

Ferris's house swordsman was a handsome man, long-limbed and graceful. He bowed to his patron, to the assembled company, and to his opponent. Katherine bowed once to them all, but Artemisia felt the extra flourish of her sword was all for her.

The man standing behind her said, "Good god. Kitty."

"Talbert," his companion drawled, "don't tell me you know the chit. Who is she?"

"It's my sister," said Gregory Talbert. "Or was. I really don't know."

Artemisia wanted to make sharp retort, but the business was going forward. "To the Death," Lord Godwin asked, "or First Blood?"

Ferris was standing in the yard, next to a hitching ring. "Oh, hardly to the Death; it's not that kind of matter. First Blood will more than suffice."

Artemisia hated him all over again. But Katherine nodded assent and saluted her opponent, and then all her care was for her friend. Katherine

Talbert was so small and compact next to Ferris's lanky swordsman. How would she even be able to reach him with her blade?

Clearly her opponent thought the same. He circled her lazily, eyeing her stance with a mocking eye, then started twirling the tip of his blade in her direction like a tease, a provocation. She ignored it, though; she followed his movement, but her blade was still. He made a couple of half-passes at her, and her wrist shifted only slightly.

Katherine's face was taut with concentration; his showed disdain. He stamped and thrust, trying to spook her. Someone laughed. She didn't move.

"Five royals on that girl," a man said, but another muttered, "Not here."

Ferris's swordsman made a beautiful move, a twist and turn, darting like a hawk's flight straight to the heart of the stocky little figure. Her frown deepened. She shifted her weight, shifted her blade, and ran a deep gash up her opponent's arm. She looked extremely surprised.

The swordsman yelped inelegantly. His blade flew from his hand. "Blood!" shouted Lord Godwin, and servants ran forward to help the wounded man.

If it had been Katherine's blood, Artemisia thought, I would have bound her wound with my own handkerchief. As it was, she was balling it in her fist, thinking, *I've won. I've won.*

"Lord Ferris?" Michael Godwin nodded to his guest. "Will you withdraw?"

"From this gathering, most certainly, by your leave," the Crescent answered. "But from the city, no."

"Are you sure?"

"The matter was of no great importance. I will take my seat in Council tomorrow, as always."

"Are you sure, my lord? If it is more convenient for you to be elsewhere at this time, we can make other arrangements."

The Crescent Chancellor drew himself up. "Godwin, do you seek to convene the Court of Honor in your stableyard? I said this matter was not such as would dictate my absence. I will be there tomorrow."

"Forgive me." Michael Godwin bowed slightly, and led his lady back indoors.

Although they would have liked to stay, the other guests followed Lord Godwin's example, leaving Katherine Talbert quite alone in the courtyard, cleaning the blood off her sword.

Gregory Talbert lingered for a moment on the stairs, watching his sister as she busied herself with her terrible weapon. Had she seen him? She did not look up. Should he speak to her? It was against the rules. And what would he say? *Well done, Kitty; we are so proud of you*? He should never have said she was his sister. He hurried away.

Artemisia's mother seized her wrist in an iron grip. She made her go through the motions of thanking their hosts and bidding them good-bye, pleading a headache and far too much excitement for a young girl's first day out after a long illness. But when they got in the carriage, she slapped her daughter hard.

"You slut! You fool!" Lady Fitz-Levi burst into tears. "Oh, who's going to marry you now?"

And indeed, the next day Lord Ferris's offer was quietly withdrawn, and the contract dissolved.

chapter III

I RETURNED TO TREMONTAINE HOUSE TO FIND MY uncle the Mad Duke sitting in the library, shredding things. There was a huge pile of ripped-up pages in front of him, and he was fiercely attacking more with a paper knife.

He looked up when I came in. "Old books," he said, "worm-eaten. Theo said it needed doing; I decided to help." The brandy decanter beside him was nearly empty. "How did it go?"

"Well," I told him. I tried to be nonchalant, but it was hard. All the energy from the fight was still with me, converted by my triumph to cheerful

bounciness. “Better than I expected. He didn’t take me seriously, so he didn’t have a chance. It was just like St—just like he taught me: when someone tries a flashy move, look for what they’re covering up and take it as an invitation. I got First Blood in about five moves.”

“Well, don’t get too smug. The next one might take you seriously, and then where will you be?” I lunged at a wall. “Don’t you dare hurt my books.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Didn’t they have food, the Godwin musicale?”

“I didn’t ask. Nobody offered. I left. Why don’t *you* ever have a musicale?”

“I did, once. She bit me.”

I laughed.

“And Lord Ferris?”

“He left. I think the wedding is off.”

“Good work,” he said, and drained the decanter. “Marcus!” My friend appeared. “Get this champion a sandwich.”

I started to follow Marcus down to the kitchens, but he turned to me and said, “Don’t come down; I’ll bring you something. Do you want me to tell Betty you’re back? She can draw you a bath.”

“Not now,” I said, “she’ll only fuss. Let’s go out to the gardens. It’s a lovely day. I want to tell you all about my fight.”

“I don’t want to hear all about your fight. You hit someone with your sword, and he didn’t hit you, that’s all I need to know. Fish pond?”

“Meet me there.”

Carp flitted amongst the weeds. I took a big bite of the bread and cheese he’d brought. “I like it up here,” I said. “The Hill is much nicer than Riverside.” Marcus’s cold was better, but he still wasn’t eating much. He rolled bits of my bread into pellets to chuck at the carp. “The air is healthier, too.” I took off my stocking so I could stick one foot in the fish pond. “Why don’t you want to hear about my fight?”

“I just don’t, that’s all. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not really interested in swordplay.”

“I am. Do you think I’m boring, then?”

“Hardly.” Marcus rolled onto his stomach so I couldn’t see his face.

I flicked my foot at the carp to keep them from the bread. I wondered if I could move without triggering their perfect flight. A swordsman, I thought,

should be as quick to sense as a fish. “Who do you think is more interesting, the duke or me?”

“Now that,” he drawled languidly, “is just the sort of question *he* would ask.”

I nearly pushed him into the fish pond. “And that,” I said, “is just the sort of tone of voice he uses when he’s trying to get out of answering something.”

“Oh re-eally? And what do you suppose I might possibly be avoiding?”

He was doing it on purpose, but I went after him anyway. With one wet foot I flipped him over like a fish on a grill, and pinned his shoulders with my knees. “You tell me,” I said. “I don’t know what’s got into you, but if you think acting like my uncle is going to sweeten me up, you’re insane.”

“You’re the one who’s like him, not me.”

I gaped at him. “How can you say that?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

I searched his face to see if he was teasing. I didn’t know how to read what I saw there. “You’re being ridiculous, Marcus.”

He pushed against my knees. “You’re hurting me.”

“I don’t care. You’re insulting me.”

“See what I mean? You don’t care about anyone else. You don’t even notice what they’re feeling, ever. You just care about getting what you want, and how you’re feeling. How much more like him do you want to be?”

“You rotten little—” I grabbed a fistful of earth and rubbed it on his face. “You take that back.”

Marcus spat dirt out of his mouth. “You’re not Tremontaine,” he said; “make me.” All that training, and I was so mad I just slapped him, hard, across the face.

With a sharp twist he was out from under me, eyes blazing. “You never, ever strike me again, do you hear me?”

“What do you want, then, a sword in the gut?”

He punched me. In the stomach. I doubled over, retching and wheezing in the new grass.

When I looked up, Marcus was sitting in a tree, well out of arm’s reach, looking down at me and swinging his legs. “You all right?”

I coughed and wiped my eyes. “You fight like guttertrash.”

“There’s a reason for that. You fight like a girl.”

“There’s a reason for that, too.”

Marcus stopped swinging his legs. “Peace. Can I come down?”

I looked up at him, successfully treed. My stomach still hurt, and there was a wretched taste in my mouth. “No,” I said meanly, lifting my chin. “I don’t think so. Not just yet.”

“You look like him.”

“You act like him,” I snapped. “You’ve got a nerve telling me *I* do, when you’re the one who says mean things like that. I never do; I’m always careful. I don’t know what’s gotten into you. You can be a total pig, Marcus, and you have been off and on for weeks, now. If I’ve done something to deserve it, I’ll say I’m sorry—but I won’t apologize if you won’t tell me what it is.”

“Don’t be silly,” he drawled affectedly. “What could you possibly have done? It is I who am to blame, I who annoyed you so much you quite rightly slapped me like a kitchenmaid, and I who consequently punched you most foully in the gut. You should report me to the duke. I should be punished, sacked, turned out of my place—”

“Stop being stupid.” Why was he refusing to be serious, all of a sudden? “He doesn’t care. You’re more like family to him than I am—” I caught my breath. Why hadn’t I seen it before? “You’re his son, aren’t you?”

Marcus hooted. “Oh, not you, too! No, of course I’m not his son. He bought me off the street, fair and square. You don’t pay money for your own flesh and blood, do you? Oh, wait a minute.” Marcus paused to consider. “Maybe he does. He bought you, after all.” He meant it to hurt, and it did. It felt like I was being stabbed. “You think I don’t know all about it? I was there for the meetings with the lawyers. I was there when he came up with the idea for your contract,” he taunted mercilessly. “I’m always there, so I hear everything. I heard him dictate all those letters to your mother. I heard how much she needed the money…” I picked up a smallish rock, and clutched it hard. “I probably knew the whole deal way before anyone told you about it. The whole household knew; Arthur Ghent was the one who wrote those letters, after all. We all knew about you before you ever came here.”

I clenched the rock’s edges sharp in my hand, but didn’t throw it. “He didn’t buy me,” I said. “It’s not like that.”

“Why not? You think because you’re his blood he cares more about you? He paid good money for us both, but at least I do useful work around here. You’re just a toy to him.”

"You're not my friend." The pain was real; I felt it in my throat, and in my chest, so I could barely get the words out. "I thought you were, but I was wrong." I threw the rock in the fish pond. "I don't know what you are, Marcus." I started up the long path back to the house.

"No, wait!" He was out of the tree so fast his jacket tore. "Oh, lord…Kit, wait—" He caught up with me, started to touch my shoulder and pulled away as though it burned his hand. I kept on walking. "Will you at least turn around and look at me?"

I ignored him.

"Katie, please listen. I have a temper. It's bad, it's really bad, and I never lose it, but when I do, I just say things. I say things I don't mean—I don't even know what I'm doing, it just comes out, none of it's true—oh, god, Kit, I wish I could cut my tongue out, I really do—please don't walk away from me. Please!"

There was something in his voice—not just pleading, but panic, as though if I didn't turn around he wasn't going to be able to breathe much longer. I stopped walking and turned around and looked at him. He was pulling at his own fingers as if he wanted to tear them off, babbling apologies. "I didn't mean any of it, it was just lies, I swear. I'm all wrong, I know I am. I'm barely a civilized human being. I've read a lot of books, I know a lot of words, but in the end I'm nothing, nothing—I'm nothing but a minnow-a-toss street punk with good clothes and fancy manners."

His desperation cut the knot of shocked rage in me, and I started to sob.

"Don't cry, Katie, please don't cry because of me."

I knuckled tears out of my eyes. "How could you say those things to me?"

"I didn't mean them, please don't hate me—"

"I thought you understood," I whimpered miserably. "I thought we were together here…"

"We are, we are. Look, don't we watch each other's backs? And don't we have secrets together?"

"It doesn't mean anything if you can't be good to me." I sniffled. "How can I trust you?"

"And I let you have your secrets, too, don't I? I'm a good friend, I don't pry. Like, I know you set up that duel without me, and I know you snuck back to Perry's without me, and I didn't say anything because I knew you didn't want me to—"

"Yes, but—"

"And what about Highcombe? Do I ever ask you about whoever it is at Highcombe you still won't tell me about, even though you know I'm dying to and you just love to torment me with it…"

Something in his voice made me laugh. He was doing it on purpose; the look on his face was silly and hopeful. "I'll tell you about it someday."

"It's someone you miss. You both do. Is it someone you love more than me?"

"Marcus—are you jealous?"

"You're all I have," he said softly; "you and him." Slowly he unfolded a pristine handkerchief. He reached with it, very carefully, towards the tears on my face, and I stood quite still and let him wipe them away, tender and methodical.

I said, "You know I love you best."

"You do?"

"Better than any of them."

He handed me the white linen. "Blow your nose."

"Especially the duke. You love him, too, don't you? I don't know how you stand him all the time."

"He's interesting."

"So's a bat, or a thunderstorm. I wouldn't choose to live with one."

"He's clever, and he can be kind if he likes you. When he remembers."

I sniffed. "He's not reliable."

Marcus looked at me with steady brown eyes. "I am reliable."

I felt it then, that curious warmth below. It had something to do with wanting to touch his curving mouth and knowing that he wanted me to. He was watching me very carefully. If anything was going to happen, I would have to do it first. I felt the edges of his lips with my fingers, and his breath on them. He was standing very still, his hands at his sides. What would have happened then is hard to say, because it didn't; instead we heard someone running down the path towards us, and it was Betty's voice, calling, "Lady Katherine!"

We broke apart, and just in time, for she took one look at me and started to carry on. "Look at the state you're in! All over mud, and no time to clean your hair; I'll just have to put it up, that's all. And you the duke's own champion, too, I hear, but when we're going to celebrate I do not know, for

such a to-do with her coming here I cannot possibly get you all cleaned up in time. Such a fine lady, what will she think of the care that I've been giving you? But if you will go fighting and playing in the garden—"

"Who is it?" I asked. "Who's here?"

"It's your mother."

I felt the whole world shift and drop out from under me.

"My mother?"

What was she doing here? Why had no one told me?

"Don't worry about your hands, we'll just put some cream on them…"

But it wasn't my hands I was worried about. "Marcus, I can't!" I gasped. "I can't see her now. I am—I look—I don't have any dresses! Oh, tell her to go away, tell her I'll write to her, I can't, I can't—"

"Katie, stop." He took my clenched hands in his. "Don't be a fool. You can do this. Just go wash up, and put on a clean shirt, and go welcome your mother to Tremontaine House. I'll tell her you're coming."

I held on to his arm. "No! No, I don't want her to see you—"

"She won't." He smiled a funny little smile, and let me watch him transform into a sedate, well-trained servant, perfectly composed. "There, see? Nobody here."

"Don't tell her…" I whispered.

He smiled into my eyes. "Don't worry, Lady Katherine. I'm very good at not telling people things. And I'm very reliable."

He bowed, and kissed my hand. He didn't do it very well, but it was adorable. I squared my shoulders, and went off to get cleaned up.

I HAD FORGOTTEN HOW BEAUTIFUL SHE WAS, AND HOW much she looked like the duke. The skin at her temples was thin, and her hair was plainly dressed. She sat in a velvet chair by the window in the mirrored drawing room, looking out over the garden and the river beyond it. I entered very quietly, so that I could look at her first. It was strange how well she fit the room; she didn't look countrified at all, just plain and elegant. She had a book on her lap, but she wasn't reading it; she was turning the pages while staring out the window.

"Hello, Mother," I said.

I saw the shock on her face.

"It's true," she said. "Oh, my god, Katherine, what's he done to you?" She didn't wait for an answer. I felt my swordsman's poise deserting me; suddenly I didn't know what to do with my hands, and I was horribly aware of my legs. "I came as soon as I could. Gregory told me you were just in some kind of fight, and I meant to wait a day, but I came rushing up yesterday because it's been six months, my darling, six long months and I could not wait a moment longer. I wanted to surprise you—"

"I'm surprised," I said. "Truly."

She rushed to me, and took my face in her hands. "Oh, my darling, are you all right?"

I tried not to let her feel me stiffen and draw back. "Of course I'm all right, Mother. It was a short fight. I won."

"Oh, Katherine." Her voice was full of sorrow. "My sweet, brave, good darling. I can only imagine what you have been through…"

I squirmed. "It's all right, Mother, really."

"You don't have to be brave any longer," she said softly. "You've done it, my darling; you've saved us."

I looked down and felt myself flush with pleasure. This was more like it. When she held out her arms this time, I went to her and let her embrace me, and breathed in the scent of lavender from our gardens at home. She guided me back to her chair and I nestled down in the corner of her skirt, my special spot where I always felt safe. "Your hair's gotten thicker," she said, stroking it.

"My maid washes it with special stuff."

"You've got your own maid? Oh, Kitty!"

"And a big room over the river, and a velvet cloak with gold tassels, and —oh, Mother! Are you staying with Gregory? I want you to see my room. You can stay with me, if you like; the bed is huge."

"Now, now, Kitty, we'll talk about all that later. We've got more important things to talk about right now."

"What things?"

She laughed, and patted my back like a puppy's: "Just run upstairs and tell your maid to put you into one of your nice dresses, and you can order us some refreshment, if you like."

"I—shall I order us something now?"

"What's the matter, darling?"

"Nothing, I just—I don't feel like changing right now, that's all."

"I just thought you'd like to show me one of your new dresses."

"Maybe later." I wanted to put the moment off as long as possible, when she would find out what my life in the duke's house was really like. She would not be happy, I knew that. I so wanted her to be happy, now. "Tell me all about you, first. Is your tooth all better? How are the boys? Has Annie married her sailor yet? Did the Oldest Oak survive another winter? What did Seb sow in the south reach this year?"

"You'll see, won't you?" she said mischievously.

"Will I?"

"Well, of course you will, my pet. Not right away, of course: I thought I'd stay in town and do a little shopping—you don't want to be seen with your silly old mother looking like some country frump, do you? And I can still have my own 'Season,' even if it's a little late!" She laughed. "You won't mind that, will you my darling, if we stay a few weeks?"

"Of course not, Mother," I said automatically.

She squeezed my shoulder. "I knew you'd understand, Katherine, you always do. After all, there's no hurry, is there?"

"I don't think so. I mean, if Sebastian's all right at home without you—and you haven't seen Gregory in ages—is he coming to visit me, too?"

"I don't think so, darling; he and your uncle don't really see eye to eye."

"Oh." That didn't surprise me.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter—Greg will put up with me awhile longer, and then, when the town empties out for the summer, we can all go home together."

There was a clutch in my stomach. "Home?"

"Yes, my love."

"But my uncle—the contract—don't I have to stay?"

She flicked her hands in the air, very like the duke. "He's not as clever as he thinks he is, for all his money. I've got new lawyers, much better ones than before. They say there's absolutely nothing to keep you here. We promised him six months, and he's had them."

I had never seen the contract, but I had watched my mother go through lawyers like kindling before, trying to get out of other unwise bargains she had made. I wondered what the truth was this time. I wondered why it had never occurred to me until now simply to ask Arthur Ghent to take it out and read it with me, so I could understand it myself.

"Just think—you'll see all the dear little ducklings, and the lambs. You always love to give them names and help Fergus with them."

"Of course, Mama." I'd forgotten all about the lambs—the lambs and the linen and the liniments and all that. It seemed like a hundred years ago, or something I'd read in a book. Did I like lambs? I did, of course I did. Lambs were sweet. Then why was my heart pounding as if I were in a fight? I took a deep breath. "Just not quite yet, as you say. You want to see the city, first."

"That's my darling." She hugged me. I had dreamed of her arms, but now I was finding them a little too tight. "I know I can always depend on you." She smiled tenderly at me. "You have no idea how lovely it will all be, now that we've got our money back again. All the funds that were tied up while he picked quarrels about them, returned to me with interest; it's quite a lot, much more than I thought it would be, and I mean to spend it now. I'm going to have a carriage, and I've ordered new hangings for the bedrooms, and all sorts of lovely fabrics and china—"

She was always forgetting the practical things. "What about the roof?"

"Oh, a new roof, of course, and books for poor Sebastian, and more kitchenmaids, so Cook has agreed to stay on after all—It will be lovely, much nicer than before, you'll see! I'd no idea there was so much there. All thanks to you, of course, my brave heroic daughter, who walked right into the ogre's den without a thought for herself, and captured his treasure for us." She hugged me. "I mean to get you the best of everything: pretty clothes, and fine furnishings, and an extra sewing maid so you don't ever have to do that nasty mending again—You can even have a real Season someday, if you want one, with balls and gowns and flowers and everything."

I thought of the Godwins' musicale, the girls in their bright dresses, and me with my sword and breeches standing before Artemisia to challenge Lord Ferris. "Oh, that's all right," I said. "I don't think I'll bother with that after all."

"But don't you want to be like all the other girls here?" she asked anxiously.

"Not really."

"Oh, Katherine." She breathed a sigh of admiration—or maybe it was just relief. "I couldn't do without you."

I took the end of her hair ribbon and twisted it gently, teasing her, but anxious for the answer. "But you've managed a *little* without me, haven't you?

Just a little bit, on your own, for six months?"

"Just a *little*. Of course Sebastian has been a great help with the house, once he stopped moping. I think he wished the Mad Duke had sent for *him* instead of you—the duke is a patron of the University, and you know how Seb loves his books."

"Maybe he can come to classes, when we've got everything settled."

The little frown appeared between my mother's brows. "Oh, no. No one else understands farming the way Seb does. I wouldn't know what to plant, or how to tell if the tenants were cheating us."

Sebastian was by far my favorite brother. I wondered if the duke would like him. Perhaps he would be willing to help him find a farm manager and send him to University. "I'm longing to see Seb again. Maybe he can come back with me in the fall, for a visit."

My mother's frown increased. "But why would you want to come back so soon?"

"Back here?" I looked at her blankly. "I—well, I've got things to do here."

"What things, Katherine?"

"Well—friends and things. And my lessons, of course. And, well—things."

"Katherine Samantha," she sighed. "You have not been listening to what I've been telling you. You're coming home with me, so we can put this all behind you."

"What? No. I mean, that's not possible."

"My poor heroic darling. Of course it looks that way to you, locked up here with this madman for so long, and no one to turn to for good counsel. But listen to me." My mother leaned forward. "You can still have a normal life. Nobody blames you. They know my brother is a lunatic; Gregory says no one decent will even visit him anymore, or have him in their homes. It's not your fault if he's sent you out in public like this—" she indicated my jacket and breeches "—And now this awful fight at Lord Godwin's…" At least Greg hadn't told her about the Rogues' Ball—maybe he didn't know himself. "Well, they'll forget in time, if we let them. The best thing to do," she explained with elaborate patience, "is to get you settled back home, do you see? Just long enough that people can forget all about it. A year or so should be enough."

"And then?"

"And then…well," she said archly, "if you decide someday that you can do without me—for I surely will never be able to do without you—well then, perhaps we can find a nice man for you to marry, and you can have—"

I couldn't say it. Not to her face, not with my heart pounding and my breath catching in my chest. I stood up, crossed the room so I stood under the portrait of the lady in grey, and clutched the marble behind me.

"I can't," I said. "I can't do any of that. I'm sorry, Mother. It's too late."

"But that's just what I'm saying! It isn't too late. We can still save you—"

"I don't need to be saved."

My mother twisted the ends of her hair. I'd seen her do it a hundred times. It used to look sweet, but now it just looked silly to me. "Katherine. Stop it. You're not being very adult. There's a whole world out there you know nothing about. Gregory has been out in Society, and he understands these things far better than you. He agrees with me that the best thing to do is to get you out of this madhouse as quickly as possible. I've got it all worked out. You'll have a quiet summer at home, and then you can start over, as if it had never been."

"But it has b—" I began, but stopped myself. You didn't tell my mother things like that.

"You can't stay in your uncle's house playing at swordfights forever, all dressed up like some booth at a fair." You couldn't argue with her when she got like this. If only she would be quiet and let me think. But her voice rattled on, more and more shrill. "You may be having fun now, but my brother is utterly mad. When he gets tired of you, you'll be out on the street, and then you'll come running home but the damage will have been done. And then what will you do? Answer me that." What kind of damage did she think there was that hadn't been done already? I remembered Marcus saying, "He bought you, too." If my uncle had bought me, my mother had sold me to him. "We must think of your future, Katherine. You know I only want what's best for you."

"You should have thought of that before you sent me here." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

I opened my mouth to apologize, to take them back before I could do any more harm. But my mother was quite still. She stood looking at me as if she were looking at a stranger, at someone she did not love or even like at all.

"You'll do as I say," she told me. "Go get your things. We're leaving."

"No, Mother, please. If you could just—"

"Katherine," she said, her voice musical with suppressed rage. "Don't make a scene." She picked up a silk pillow, thick with embroidery of exotic birds with long tail feathers, and began picking at the threads with her nails. "This nonsense has to stop. We must think of your future."

"I can't," I said miserably, watching the bright threads of silk flying out of her hands, clinging to her skirt, falling to the floor. "I would if I could, honestly, Mother, but I just can't do it now."

Her fingers dug into the cloth of the cushion. "It isn't like you to be so selfish. Do you want to bring disgrace on our entire family? What am I going to do without you? I can't manage alone!"

There was a noise as the door opened. The Duke Tremontaine stood in the doorway, dressed to go out, and only slightly more sober than when I'd seen him last. He looked at me, and looked at his sister, and blinked.

"Hello, Janine," he said. "Welcome to Tremontaine House."

My mother looked her brother in the eyes. He was taller than she was, but her gaze was fierce. "My daughter," she said to him. "You have ruined my daughter."

My uncle looked startled. "Ruined her? I never touched her."

"You didn't have to. Look what you've done to her!"

"She seems all right to me. Are you all right, Katherine?" I pressed my back against the wall, as if I could melt right into it, and didn't answer. I knew what was coming, even if he didn't. He took a step toward my mother. "There's nothing wrong with your daughter. My cushion, on the other hand, you are certainly ruining."

"What do you care?" she said, tearing it further. "You've got plenty more. You've got everything in the world here, haven't you? Look at this house! Look at your suit, for that matter—I can't imagine what that costs."

"Neither can I; that's why they send me the bill."

"Are you trying to make me laugh? You have everything, everything, everything—money, jewels, land, heaven knows what, and it isn't enough for you—you have everything you want and more—and now you try to take my child from me."

I wondered if it was worth darting in and trying to clear things from her path. But that would only make it worse. And she was right; he could buy plenty more.

"That's ridiculous," the duke said weakly.

"Is it?" my mother hissed. "Is that what it is?"

"Janine, stop carrying on like some sort of mad stage witch." She picked up an etched glass bud vase, clutching it in her hand like a dagger. "Janine, listen to me and be reasonable and put that down."

"Why should I be reasonable? Were you reasonable? You didn't think much about being reasonable when you ran away and ruined our chances with Grandmama and left us thinking you were dead, did you? You left me all alone to deal with Mother and you know what she was like—"

"I left you? *I* left you?" Something changed in him, like a fighter who thinks he's playing in a practice bout and suddenly realizes the swords are not tipped. His face was very white, and his hands were no longer elegant. He opened them and closed them on nothing. "You're the one who left, Janine. I was there waiting for you. Don't you remember? You said you would run away before you'd marry that old fool. And I said, Right, then, we'll do it. I said, No one is going to take my sister away like that. I said, Meet me in the orchard—in the *orchard*, Janine, *not in the goddamned chapel!*"

I had never heard him roar like that before. She was staring at him, mesmerized, as white as he was and whiter, down to her lips, as though his story were draining all the blood from her. He stepped toward her, and she didn't move. "What on earth was I doing freezing in the orchard all night with a bag of food and a pair of cloaks, while you were being laced into your wedding dress?"

My mother shook her head, mute. I had my hands pressed to my mouth, listening, listening. The trouble was, I could see it. I could see it all perfectly clearly.

"I missed the main event," he said dryly, a bit more like himself. "I got in trouble for that, for missing my sister's wedding. Mother locked me in the—" for a moment he lost the word, lost his smooth and cruel habit of speech—then he gasped and regained it—"She had them lock me in the storage cell, you remember? Well, of course you do, you'd been there, too, not long before. I wasn't whipped; I was just locked in, to teach me manners. It was very cramped in there, I was getting big for it. But it didn't matter. Nothing did, because you weren't coming back."

She held out a hand to him. "I didn't know. I thought you were angry with me, that's why you weren't there. I wanted to come. But I was so afraid of

them."

"I would have helped you!"

"You couldn't." When she said that, he actually flinched as if he had been struck. "You couldn't help me. You couldn't do anything. You couldn't stop them marrying me off any more than you could stop them locking you up, Davey. I knew that then."

She tried to touch him, but he turned away. "It was a long time ago," she said. "But I did the right thing."

"You did what they told you to do. And what did it gain you?"

"I had a husband," she said. "I have my children. I did my duty."

"You should have fought," he growled. "You should have stood and fought."

Oh, stop, I wanted to tell him. *Mother never fights, not the way you mean. Stop before something happens.* But I was afraid to come between them.

"You're being unfair. Our parents meant well. They wanted the best for us."

He looked at her in real surprise. "No, they didn't. We were raised by servants. Don't you remember? All Father cared about was his maps. Mother cared about chapel and about getting back at her own mother, the dread Duchess Tremontaine, who was, let me tell you, a real piece of work."

"I wouldn't know. I never met her. She had no interest in me, Mother said."

"Mother didn't wait to find out, did she? She was in too much of a hurry to marry you off to the highest-bidding country bumpkin. I would have brought you to the city with me—"

"No, Davey. She did try. When Charles first offered for me, Mother wrote to the duchess, to ask if she would bring me out properly and make a better match. But the duchess wrote back to say, no, she wasn't interested. So Mother accepted Charles's suit."

My uncle stared at her. "To *spite* her? She married you off to that idiot just to spite her mother?"

"Charles wasn't an idiot. He was a prosperous landowner, from a fine old family. I was very lucky, really. So were Father and Mother, because I lived nearby so I could look after them—"

"Stop it!" he raged. "Stop *lying*! How can you be saying all these things? You, you who were—oh, god. You, Janine. You were so pure of heart. You

saved my life, you held me in your arms and told me stories when things were really bad—you made up whole countries for us to hide in, horses for us to ride there…don't you remember Storm Cloud and Flame of the Sea?"

My mother clutched the folds of her skirt, saying nothing. He turned his back to her, poured himself a brandy. "You were strong and true. I wanted to be like you." He knocked back the drink. "I know you fought them. You've forgotten, that's all. I wasn't there. I was in the orchard. But you tried, I know. I remember, if you don't. And afterwards—everything I did, I did to avenge what they did to you. Everything."

"Including trying to ruin me and my family?"

He turned slowly to look at her, his head low. "You could have come to me. You could have written, or you could have come."

She turned to him with that same strange gesture he had made before, hands outstretched, opening and closing on nothing. "You know why I couldn't come."

"I know now," he said harshly. "It's because you've forgotten everything. You've turned it all into comfortable lies. You're just like the rest of them now. Go away. I don't want you in my house."

"No!" I heard my own voice shatter the awful stillness of the room. But I wasn't fast enough this time. I should have been. Had I forgotten? I should have seen her looking back at the glass bud vase. I should have been by her side, I should have taken it out of her hand before she smashed it against the table and held a shard so tightly the blood started seeping between her fingers.

"Oh!" I heard the duke draw in his breath, not shocked, but as if he'd suddenly remembered something.

She dropped the glass to the carpet, showed him her open hand, bleeding. "This is truth," she said. "I know that this is truth, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I used to do that, too." He took her palm and examined it. "It's all right." She let him wrap his large white handkerchief lightly around her hand to catch the blood. "But I've got something better, now. Here, I'll show you. Want to see?" She stared at him, spellbound. He crossed the room to a locked cabinet and took out the key.

I knew what he kept in there. "You can't give my mother that!"

"Watch me," he said calmly, taking out the little vials of precious stuff. "Or better yet, don't."

I shouted, “You put that down!”

“Don’t speak to your uncle like that,” my mother said. “He’ll think you weren’t brought up properly.”

“Run along, Katherine,” my uncle said. “Your mother and I have a lot to talk about.”

I took the stairs to my room two at a time, and slammed the door and locked it behind me. Maybe Marcus could stop him, but he’d never stopped the duke before, and I didn’t want him to see my mother like this. I didn’t want to ask Marcus for anything, either, not after what had nearly happened in the garden between us. I got into bed and snapped the curtains on their rings closed around me, and pulled the covers over my head.

I had wanted to know family secrets. Well, now I knew them. My uncle didn’t hate my mother after all. And he had always been angry at everyone, not just us. He didn’t know that she still told wonderful stories, and snuck off to the orchard to eat apples when she should be counting spoons. He didn’t know that my father and mother had planned a garden together, and stayed up all night when I was sick. Maybe she was telling him now. If she was even there. If they could even talk.

The night was coming on. I unwrapped myself, and lay stiffly staring up at the dusky canopy above me.

Today I had wounded a man, and hit my best friend and almost kissed him. I had seen my mother for the first time in half a year and defied her. Three fights in one day, and only one I knew that I had won for certain, the one with rules.

Just that morning, I had been polishing my sword for the duel. I had to remember that whatever else happened, today I had avenged the honor of my friend Artemisia. I had challenged a real swordsman, who was neither stupid nor drunk, and I had bested him. Maybe my family didn’t want to hear about my fight, but half the nobility of the city had witnessed it. People would talk about me, and know my name. I had spoken it loudly and clearly, for all to hear. Maybe I would become fashionable; maybe people would invite me to dinner and demand to hear the details. In my head, I played over again all the moves of the duel. It was harder than I thought to remember each one in order, but I wanted to get it right, for when someone finally asked me.

IT WAS DARK WHEN I WOKE UP. BETTY HAD UNLOCKED my door. I heard the clatter as she warmed milk for me at the hearth.

"Where's the duke?" I asked, and she said, "Out."

"Where is my mother?"

"Gone with him, gone…Never you mind all that, my hero, it doesn't matter. You be easy, now."

She poured whiskey into my milk, and stirred, and gave it to me and I drank it. She poured cans of warm water into my tub, and bathed me, and washed and dried and plaited my hair, and crooned, "My champion, my great sword, you are, you are…" I smelt the whiskey on her breath, and I didn't care. I just sat in the tub and cried, and let her dry me off and put me back to bed.

I WOKE UP EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. THE HOUSEHOLD was barely stirring. The duke would not be up for hours yet. Marcus might be awake, but I wasn't ready to face him. I had to see my uncle, first.

I put on some loose clothes and went to the wet-rabbit room and practiced furiously for a long time. When I heard the commotion that meant the duke was awake and asking for things, I went to change out of my practice clothes, because it would be another hour before he was fit to be spoken to.

At noon I found the Duke Tremontaine eating breakfast in the morning room.

"Where's my mother?" I demanded.

He looked quizzically at me. "Are you going to accuse me of ruining her? Please don't. And don't speak to me in that tone; I'll think you weren't brought up properly."

I didn't laugh. "Where is she?"

"How should I know? She cried a lot. We talked. We devoured eight whole tablets of raw chocolate and the rest of the brandy. We talked until midnight, when it was time for me to be at Blackwoods'. She lost money at cards. She plays very badly, your mother."

I ground my teeth. "Has she gone back home?"

"To your brother's. The respectable one on Lower Patrick Street. I don't know where she's going next; I suspect she doesn't, either. You can write her

and ask," he said. "You're free to correspond with anyone you like, now, you know. As she reminded me more than once. The woman has no head for drink, none at all. If I understood her, she will be writing you frequently. I'm sure you'll hear all about it."

He was in that kind of mood.

"And get your things together. We're going back to Riverside until this place is truly habitable."

"I'm staying," I said.

"Here? On the Hill? By yourself?"

"I mean, I'm staying with you."

"Well, of course you are. Pass the jam."

I wanted to throw the toast in his face. "What about me? Were you so busy debauching my mother you lost track of why she came here in the first place? Did you get her drunk just so you wouldn't have to talk about my—my *future*?"

"Your future is entirely up to you." The jam was perfectly within his reach when he bothered to lean up and over for it.

"Well, who is going to provide for me?"

"Please don't shout."

"I'm not shouting. My mother thinks you're going to toss me back out when you're sick of me, you know. She thinks you've made me into an unmarriageable freak." He didn't interrupt; he just kept crunching on his toast. I'd had enough. "Do you even think of me as your kin at all, or am I just some—some minnow-a-toss street kid to you, with good clothes and a sword?"

It got his attention—but not the way I wanted. He put down his toast half-eaten, and gazed at me icily. "Where did you hear that phrase, pray?"

It's what Marcus had called himself yesterday, but I was certainly not going to tell him that. "I dunno."

"Do you know what it means?" he asked.

Cowed, I answered, like a schoolgirl with a lesson: "A minnow's what they call a brass coin in Riverside. A toss—some kind of ball game, I guess."

"Keep guessing," he said dryly. "And don't let me hear you use that phrase again."

I glowered at him. "You're not my mother."

"She doesn't know what it means either. But if you say it around someone who does, they will either slap your face or laugh at you. There—you are warned." He slathered more jam on his half a piece of cold toast. "I suppose, if Janine is going to be unreasonable, that I'm going to have to offer you something or you'll pester me to death. A salary, or a gift of land, or something. You figure it out; it will be good for you, teach you the value of money and how things work. Come to me when you have some idea, and we'll negotiate. You'll learn a lot."

"I'll ask a lot," I said, and he said, "Fine."

"And by the way," I added, "I think I know all your names now."

"What?" he asked, through a mouthful of toast.

"The first day I came here—you don't even remember, do you?"

"Of course I remember the first day you came. Ring for more toast. Have you eaten? Well, in that case, have you seen Marcus yet today? He seemed a little odd."

I had not seen Marcus; I'd wanted to confront my uncle before anything else happened. Now I went upstairs to find him and bring him up to date.

Marcus was extremely odd. He was in his room packing for Riverside already. He folded each of his own shirts very carefully, lining up all the seams like folds on a map.

"Your mother's pretty," he said, folding.

"What did she say to you?"

"Nothing. I make a very convincing servant."

"Well…well, thank you." It was utterly maddening, the way he fussed over that shirt and wouldn't look at me. "Marcus," I asked, "are you still angry with me?"

"No."

"Then tell me what's wrong or I'm going to rip that shirt right out of your hands!"

He put it down and looked straight at me.

"Are you leaving?" he said. His face was very white—I could see some stubble against his skin. I didn't know he shaved.

"No. She wanted me to, but I said not."

"Oh." He picked up the shirt, and put it down again. "Oh."

"Why are you doing that? I bet Fleming would pack for you, if you asked him."

"I don't like other people touching my things."

"How about me?" I offered. "I bet we could get it done in no time, if you let me help."

Marcus smiled slowly. "Katie. You're up to something."

"I was just thinking…" And I was. I needed my friend now; I needed to put yesterday behind us, and take us back to where we were together, bonded in mischief and common cause. "The duke's still in his dressing gown, eating toast," I said. "He'll be hours, yet. If we hurry, we can still nip down the Hill to Teresa Grey's together before we leave for Riverside. That is, if you're still interested in what she might be up to."

"Hand me those brushes," Marcus said.

We left the duke being shaved by his valet and changing his mind about his clothes again, and went off down the hill to the house of Lucius Perry's mysterious lady, together.

chapter IV

LUCIUS PERRY'S LOVER APPEARED TO HAVE GONE mad. We stared, fascinated, from the bushes, as Teresa Grey paced up and down the length of her studio, waving her hands in the air and shouting. We couldn't hear what she was saying, but it was clearly pretty awful. She lunged into space, twisted, fell down, and then jumped up again and dashed to the table where she dipped a pen in ink and started scribbling furiously.

Marcus poked me with his elbow and grinned. Her hair was a mess, and there was an inkblot on her nose where she'd rubbed it without thinking.

"Love letter?" I mouthed, but he shook his head: "Watch."

I watched. She got up and did it all over again, and then went back to her pen, and then she rose and turned her back to us and shouted something.

She must have been calling for Lucius Perry, because he came in then, looking fresh as a daisy and very glad to be summoned. She moved him into place, and did the same movements again, only this time he was talking and gesturing back at her so she didn't look so crazy, and then it all started making sense. They were acting out a scene together, a fight of some kind: first an argument, and then a struggle that ended with Teresa Grey falling to the floor. Lucius helped her up, and then he hung over her shoulder while she wrote. He pointed at the paper, and she changed something and laughed. Our Lucius looked very young; he wasn't trying to be anything, he was just enjoying himself.

Then she shook sand onto the wet ink, and blew it off and lifted up her page and read. She pitched her voice loud enough that we could hear just the sound of it, but not any of the words. In the bushes, we writhed quietly in frustration—if only we could get close enough to the window to hear! Seeing them through the long double windows, with curtains on either side…it was like being at the theatre with wax stuffed in our ears.

"A novel?" Marcus murmured. "One of those things girls like to read?"

Teresa Grey bowed, and Lucius Perry applauded. But I already knew. "It's a play," I said. "She writes plays."

Lucius put his arms around her, and the paper dropped to the ground. This time, she returned his embrace eagerly, warmly. Oh, the way he held her, the way he touched her hair! The way she smiled and stretched out her throat for his kiss…I dug my nails into my palms. The way her fingers clenched in the small of his back, the way he moved to be closer to her.

I snuck a look at Marcus. Did he see what I saw? A way for two people to be together, to touch each other and be happy and be friends without fear? What if he laughed at them, or was disgusted? What if he saw something entirely different?

He was watching them with enormous concentration, as if he were trying to figure something out for the first time: a math problem, maybe, or a series of moves in shesh, and not at all sure he'd got it right.

"If it's a play," he said, "I hope it has a happy ending."

I'd moved a little closer to him without realizing it, but now I moved away. "Come on," I said, "we'd better not be late."

We didn't even bother to be quiet going over the wall; they weren't going to hear us.

ARTEMISIA FITZ-LEVI WAS NOW FREE TO MARRY ANYONE who would have her. She was not, however, free to leave the house.

She had taken up fancywork. It gave her something to do with her hands, so that she didn't tear her mother's eyes out, or better yet, her tongue. She plied her tiny hook with a vengeance, creating yards of tatted lace of varying sizes.

"At least Lord Ferris is behaving like a gentleman," Lady Fitz-Levi said again.

Artemisia jabbed the shuttle through another hole. It made a change from yesterday's refrain of *There, miss, are you satisfied?* or the day before, with its shrieks of *Ruined, ruined, this* friend *of yours has ruined you!*

"A real gentleman would have permitted me to break the engagement myself."

"And make you look like a jilt? Oh, no. Lord Ferris is behaving as he should—though I could wish he had waited just a little longer after that odious challenge so people would not be tempted to connect the two. As long as he continues to comport himself with discretion and not let anyone suggest the fault was yours…"

"But Mother, I won the duel! That proves it wasn't my fault!"

"Shh, darling. We know that, but you understand that no one else must, now must they? Or they could find out about that—*other* thing, and we don't want that, now, do we? Oh, Artemisia, we must do what we can to get you back on your feet! Perhaps a companion, someone sedate…My cousin Lettice married a drunkard, she never had any sense, and now that she's widowed she's short of funds; perhaps she'd be willing to come chaperone you."

"I don't care."

Her mother considered her. "No, Lettice could never handle you. There's only one thing for it. You need a new lover, and quickly."

"*What?*"

"Yes, indeed, my darling. It's the only way to allay suspicion: to make it look as though you fell for someone else and Ferris kindly released you. Now, who among all your beaux did you like second-best?"

"No one." Artemisia twisted her shuttle with a sure hand. "I will never marry."

"Is that what you want to be, a disgraced old maid? It's not a life for you, my dear, indeed it's not." Now her mother softened and seemed to look at her directly. Even sulky and resentful, Artemisia was a pretty picture in the low chair by the window, her dark curls gleaming, her slender neck bent over her work. "You like lively people and nice things. You love Society—and Society will love you once again, once we have you settled. The question is, who is still available who's worth having? Someone nearer your own age, I think, dearest, so you can enjoy a long life together." Artemisia shuddered. "It's a pity Terence Monteith is taken—he was just mad about you, wasn't he?"

"He was a bore."

"Yes, a bit. Still, he is such a *safe* young man. So unexceptionable."

"He wouldn't want me now."

"Do you think so?" Her mother looked archly at her. "I happen to know he'd snap you up in an instant. But he would have to break with Lady Eugenia first, and that would cause scandal, and I think we've had enough of that for one season. What about Gregory Talbert, then?"

"You said he was unsuitable."

"His mother has come to town. She is spending a great deal on clothes for herself and furnishings for their country house. He is not as unsuitable as he once was. And he is still free."

"Dream on, Mama. The fact is, I'm damaged goods."

"Don't be a fool, girl. Nobody knows about that unfortunate incident, and as long as Lord Ferris keeps on being a gentleman, nobody has to, since fortunately there was no…untoward result. It is simply a matter of discretion. Discretion, breeding, and…well, a reasonable offer on our part, which of course we will make. Your marriage portion will be the same as it was for Lord Ferris; better, even. He can see that and regret it 'til his dying day."

"May it be soon," Artemisia muttered.

Her mother ignored her. "Many of the finest families are overburdened with second, third, even fourth sons whose inheritance is nothing to speak

of. Any one of them would be delighted with the match. In fact—Oh!" Her mother smiled. "Why did I not think of this before? It seems so obvious, and you've been such good friends for years, now."

"I can't marry my brother," Artemisia said waspishly.

"No! I was thinking of your cousin Lucius."

"Lucius Perry," Artemisia said softly. Well, of course. He already knew of her condition; he'd brought her home from the Rogues' Ball, after all, and never told a soul. "I thought he'd disgraced himself, somehow."

"Well, dear…" Her mother weighed the situation and decided it was time to be frank. "The truth is, when dear Lucius first came to town he was very young, and he fell in with the wrong crowd. He made a bit of a spectacle of himself, and your aunt and uncle were very upset."

Artemisia remembered Lucius sitting in her window seat saying, "It's the old story: boy comes to city, boy disobliges family, family hears about it, ructions ensue." Is this what he'd meant?

"But he's a good boy, you see. As soon as he learned how much harm he might be doing his family and himself, he promised them he'd stop. And I think you'll agree he's behaved admirably ever since. There's not a breath of scandal anyone can attach to Lucius Perry."

"No," Artemisia said thoughtfully, "he's never around for people to notice. He's sleepy, and quiet, and he's always late for things."

"But there's no harm in that. He's a handsome boy with nice manners, very fond of you. I really think I shall write to my sister and see what we can arrange."

"*Then* may I go to the play?" She said it just to annoy, knowing the answer already.

Predictably, her mother launched into: "And don't think I don't know what kind of nonsense That Book's put into your head. 'Fabian,' indeed. When we read it, my friends and I knew that he was a monster, a seducer and a cheat—we all agreed Tyrian was worth two of him—Helena Nevilleson was even planning to name her firstborn Tyrian, but her husband wouldn't permit it. To put such a thing on the stage, and with the Black Rose, of all people…"

"All the girls have seen it," she wheedled.

"Well, now," her mother said. "Maybe you should go, at that. We don't want you to disappear, do we? Why don't we all go next week, and invite

your cousin Lucius to join us?"

THE DUKE TREMONTAINE HAD RETURNED TO RIVERSIDE. The Black Rose did not like visiting him there as well as she liked his house on the Hill, but now that she had accepted a substantial gift from him and severed her ties with her last protector, she hardly felt that she could be too choosy about where to consummate their new arrangement.

"Points to you," she said; "points to you and your little niece."

"What in hell are you talking about?" He sucked a deep breath in on his pipe. "You must forgive me, but I've been enmeshed in family matters. I'm not up on the talk of the town."

"The talk of the town, as you very well know, is that Katherine challenged and defeated Anthony Deverin, though it didn't faze Ferris one little bit. No one is claiming the challenge, so it's anyone's guess what the offense was, and to whom—but all the safe money's on you, of course, on behalf of someone he'd insulted…Oh, Alec," she wrapped herself sinuously around him, "dare I think that it was on my behalf?"

"Think what you like," he said; "it wasn't."

She laughed. "If you weren't so completely useless, I'd be in love with you already. You're the only one who tells me the truth."

"It was Katherine's idea, really. Ask her, if you like. She's around. I thought it best to keep her in Riverside for a while. The Hill is such a…busy place right now."

"Yes, you're right. Much safer for her here, if dear Tony tries anything. He's not a forgiving sort, as I know." He offered her the pipe, but she shook her head. "I don't. You shouldn't, either."

"Why not? It relaxes me."

"You want to be on your guard," she said. "You've made a real enemy of Lord Ferris."

"I did that before you were born." He laid a warm hand on her thigh, and she did not contradict his arithmetic. "Kiss me," he drawled, "I can't feel my knees."

chapter V

ANTHONY DEVERIN, LORD FERRIS, WAS PREPARED to put up with a great deal of inconvenience, even of affront. But he did not readily forgive. In the matter of his stymied marriage, he put the blame where it truly lay: not with the gormless Fitz-Levi clan and their bubble-headed daughter, but with his ancient and annoying enemy, the Duke Tremontaine. Ferris needed to know: had the duel been a mere whim, an opportunity to discomfit him and show off the duke's latest family eccentric, or was it more, the opening salvo in a plan to bring Ferris down altogether? It would not do to wait to find out. He would strike first, to make sure Tremontaine knew he was not without resources.

Ferris made certain inquiries and was not disappointed; if anything, he was a bit surprised at just how many fronts young Campion had left himself exposed on. Going after him would be like shooting arrows at a popinjay tied to a pole. Only the question of St Vier remained open. But it was early days, yet.

It began, innocently enough, with a bit of doggerel and a little artwork, nothing out of the ordinary in a city where printers regularly catered to the tastes of a population that simultaneously gloried in the glamour of its resident nobility and loved seeing them taken down a notch.

On this particular broadsheet, it was His Lordship of Tremontaine being taken down. But instead of the usual willing boy or overendowed swordsman, the duke's partner was a grossly fat woman, dressed like a cross between a peasant and a shopkeeper from what one could see, for her skirts were up over her head with His Lordship crawling under them exclaiming: *Behold the*

motions of the stars! while she pointed upward, responding: *No, you fool! They're up there still!*

The duke's Riverside household staff, from scullions to secretaries, were far from pleased. What went on between their walls was private business, family business. Those snooty Hill servants might be given to passing on gossip up and down town, but in Riverside things were different. For the duke's ugly Mathematical Girl to be the butt of city jokes was dead wrong. Someone had been talking, and the wrong person had been listening.

"I'll have them put out on the street," the duke told Flavia, "whoever it is."

"You're an idiot," she said mechanically. The Ugly Girl herself was unaware of the rush of sympathy the household felt on her behalf. She'd received little of it in her life, and did not look for it now. "It could be anyone —one of your scholars, drinking in a tavern, making a quip where some apprentice would overhear him, that's all it would take."

"I'll find someone to whip the printer, then. If it distresses you so."

"Don't be an idiot."

The second broadsheet was even more offensive: calculations on a slate being made by a piglike woman with the duke's own tool engulfed in her hammy hand—

"And they're not even *right*!" she wailed, waving the sheet.

He chuckled. "Would you expect them to be?"

She said, "Yes, dammit. They owe me that, at least."

Again he said, "I'll make them stop, if you mind so much."

She looked bleakly at her friend. "*How* will you make them stop? Will you really set bullies on the printer? the artist?"

"Why not?" he said airily; but he knew he was in the wrong. He answered her unspoken accusation himself: "It's not unheard of. Karleigh did it when they targeted his mother. Davenant is known as a man not to mock. In a city where most of the wealth is controlled by a small few, certain things are overlooked, particularly when it comes to the assertion of privilege."

"Don't you dare." She stood rigid, clutching the latest broadsheet in her two hands in front of her.

"Well, it's not as if I can cry challenge on tradesmen, more's the pity."

"You damnable hypocrite, don't you dare."

The duke paced his study once, twice. His back to her, he stopped and said, "Flavia. I'm the Duke of Riverside. I build things here and pretty much keep the peace, and discourage certain behaviors. If you think all that has been achieved through entirely civil and lawful means, you've had your head in a bucket."

"I've enjoyed having my head in a bucket. It's a very nice bucket. I've enjoyed the books and the fire and food and conversation. But you're right to call me on it. You're right." She picked up a couple of books, examined the spines. "These are mine, aren't they? You really did give them to me?"

"Put those down," he said. "Don't be an idiot. Our theories stand. We both see clearly; we know what's right. Even if it's not always possible to act on it, don't you think it matters to be able to call things by their true names?"

"It's not your fault," she said. "I'm not a total idiot. I know you do your best. I was just stupid to think you could—I could—" She shrugged and swiped at her nose with one wrist, her hands being full of books. "I thought I would be safe here."

"You are." For the first time, he touched her, touched her hand. "Safe from everything but paper and ink. Please. Put those down."

"Paper and ink." She clutched the books to her ample chest. "They're not nothing, Alec. They're pretty much everything to me: the embodiment of ideas, of thought—of free and open thought. Of inquiry and supposition. All of it."

"I know," he said. "But—"

"You've got all your other things—your poetry, your drugs, your pretty men and fancy clothes. You don't need just this. I do."

He said with unusual patience, "Do you think, if you leave my house, everything will suddenly slip back into place?" And when she didn't answer right away, he said more heatedly, "And you're going back where? To an unheated room at University and one cooked meal a week, tutoring students too stupid and lazy to attend lectures given by masters with half your brains? You'd leave my house for that?"

"Your patronage," the Ugly Girl said. "I'm leaving your patronage. Don't you understand? I don't like being looked at. I don't like being talked about. I don't really like compromise."

He said, "And I don't like you letting them chase you away. It seems, well, cowardly."

"It is. I have my limits. Clever of them to find them. Who are 'they,' by the way?"

"I don't know," the duke said. "I wonder who I've offended lately?"

"Everyone. You offend everyone."

"Don't leave," he said. "It will give them so much pleasure."

"Almost, for that," she conceded, "but no. I'd better."

"Come to dinner next week," he urged. "Ridley and his gang are going to argue about circulation. Maybe he'll demonstrate on a roast chicken again."

"No," she said. "I'm going to disappear for a while—as much as I can, anyway; nobody really cares about the University. And I never liked those dinners. Didn't you notice? It was always best when you told me about them after."

"Breakfast next morning, then?"

"Don't wait up," she said.

She left the crumpled broadsheets on the floor. And she left an enormous space in the duke's library, in his study, in his days and nights.

But in the end he got back at her, even if he never got her back. Before the year was out, the stuffy old University at the heart of the City boasted the first ever Women's Fellowship in Mathematics, which was taken by the only suitable available candidate, a large and ugly woman of indeterminate age who always wore a voluminous black scholar's robe over her shapeless gowns and lectured with a combination of rigor and dry wit that made her classes, in time, immensely popular.

ARTEMISIA FITZ-LEVI WITNESSED LORD FERRIS'S second strike against the duke herself.

She witnessed it from a box at the theatre in the company of her mother, her brother, and her cousin Lucius. Lucius Perry had not yet declared himself a formal suitor, despite his parents' indication that they would view the match with favor, but Lady Fitz-Levi still wanted him seen with her daughter, and Artemisia was simply grateful for his company.

The truth was, it took courage for her to go out in public. Despite her friends' assurances that it was nothing, she knew people were still talking

about her ruptured betrothal and its possible causes. Although no one who knew them well could seriously entertain the notion that the Fitz-Levi family had hired Tremontaine's wild niece, the proximity of the challenge to Lord Ferris's break with Artemisia was hard to ignore. There was talk of a romance between the two girls, though no one had ever seen them together. Those who believed the challenge lay between Ferris and the Mad Duke were still free to wonder what had caused the Crescent to release Lady Artemisia from her betrothal. If she had not been the wronged party, then perhaps something else about her had put Lord Ferris off, and her deficiencies were lovingly enumerated, even by her friends.

Thus the Fitz-Levi party arrived early at the theatre, so as to be settled in their box before the crowds started in. Artemisia sat towards the back of the box where she would not easily be seen, wishing she didn't have to. All thought of her own situation vanished, though, when the play began. Candles were lit, and there was Stella's bedroom, with its tall window and canopied bed, exactly as in the book. In walked a beautiful woman—a little old for girlish Stella to Artemisia's critical eye, but she carried herself well. "No, thank you," the actress said, her head turned a little offstage. "I will put myself to bed."

"Let the duke do it!"

A man's voice, crude, from the cheap back seats. There was general *shushing*, and the scene went on. The Black Rose won Artemisia over with her portrayal of Stella's gentle innocence. When Fabian appeared in her chamber, armed and ready to kill her as he was sworn to do, Artemisia clutched her fan so hard she nearly broke it. Stella did not plead for her life; she let her youth and beauty of spirit plead for her. And the swordsman succumbed, as he must. "Lady Stella," he said, "your girlhood ends tonight. Whether by my sword or in my arms, I leave the choice to you."

"It is no choice," she said, trembling. "Either way, my will is forced."

"Is it?" Though the length of his sword was still between them, he looked deep into her eyes. "Know this, then: that you choose for us both. For in taking your life tonight, I end mine as well. The sun cannot rise on the face of a man who has destroyed such a jewel."

"What is your name?"

"If you will it, it is Death. Death for us both."

"And if I will otherwise?"

"Then I will give you joy." He fell on his knees before her, his sword at his side, the distance still between them. "And I am your servant, now, until the moment I draw my final breath."

Artemisia found that she was weeping—not the slow pleasant tears that theatre usually called forth, but wrenching sobs she felt her body could barely contain. She tried to stifle them, to hear what came next, although she knew the words by heart:

"Then rise," bright Stella said. "I choose freely, and I choose you." She held out her hand.

"Save it for Tremontaine!" A different voice, from a different corner of the theatre.

"Shut your face!" a woman shouted back, and others chorused agreement. This was Stella's moment, and no man would take it from them. The theatre was silent as the Black Rose parted the curtains of the huge bed, and silent as the couple embraced within them.

Silent, too, as Viola appeared on the stage above, jacketed and breeched as Tyrian, wondering what had happened to keep Fabian so late.

The two friends met (while the bedroom was made to disappear), and Fabian explained his desperate case and even more desperate remedy. To save Stella's life he must betray a patron, and in so doing betray his honor, a swordsman's most cherished possession, and next to his sword, his most valuable. But one bright, fated woman had turned the world inside out, changed honor to disgrace and death to life. He would leave the city now and send word to his patron that he had found the mark too easy, that his blade rebelled and sought a worthier foe.

"Think you," said Tyrian, "they'll let it go at that? Dream on, my friend. I will watch your beauty, and if she be not worthy of your love, I'll challenge her myself."

Mangrove appeared next. In the book this happened later, but Artemisia could see that it was time to present the villain, who was Stella's evil cousin's swordsman and second in command. Mangrove waited for Stella in a temple, where he knew she was coming to pray, which was not in the book but allowed them to drop some impressive columns from the flies above. He leaned arrogantly against one and said, "Here comes the lady now."

The Black Rose entered, veiled head to toe in midnight blue.

"Is it raining?" Lady Fitz-Levi inquired. It wasn't rain: all around the theatre, people were hissing. The sounds of *shh!* mixed with the hissing, making it worse. The Black Rose said something, but no one could hear her. She stood very still, and so did Mangrove, frozen in his sneer.

Someone began a rhythmic clapping, making it impossible for the actors to be heard. People in the audience started shouting, and the language wasn't pretty.

At last the noise subsided. Stella lifted a hand to her veil, and Mangrove stepped forward. "Gentle lady," he said, a terrible mockery of Fabian's opening lines, "allow me."

But she kept her hands on her veil. "Sir, you are not known to me. My face—" The rest of the speech was lost in a volley of hisses. Every time the Black Rose opened her mouth, it was the same.

"Let's go," said Lucius Perry. "They'll never get through the play."

Her mother was outraged. "Can't they make them stop?"

"You can't control such an audience, Aunt."

"But what's wrong?" Artemisia asked. "I think she's very good."

"Goose," her brother said fondly. "It's a setup. Someone's paid to have her booed. A rival, perhaps—for the part, or for her affections…"

"Well, whoever did it, I'd like to slap them," his sister said. "Oh, look, Robert, people are throwing flowers! Quick, rush out and buy me some, I want to throw them, too."

The stage was slowly carpeted in blossoms. When they grew deep enough, the Black Rose scooped up a great armful, and swept offstage.

WORD REACHED RIVERSIDE QUICKLY. THE DUKE Tremontaine sent his carriage for her, and it carried the Black Rose unimpeded to the Bridge, where a closed chair waited to bring her to him.

"They *booed* me." Her eyes flashed regally, and she would not sit down, although she accepted a goblet of brandy. "I have never been hissed in a theatre before. Never."

He said, "How lucky for you. Whom have you managed to offend?"

She stopped her pacing long enough to fix him with her startling eyes. She was not a small woman, and the duke was sitting down, teasing at a flower that had fallen from her hair. "Don't you know?" she said. "I heard it

clearly, and so did everyone else, I'll be bound. Your name, dear, not mine. I am very popular. You, it seems, are not."

"What a surprise." He dropped petals on the floor. "And what a good thing I don't care."

"How nice for you that you don't have to."

"Meaning," he drawled, "that you do."

"Just so." She leaned down and kissed him long and hard, 'til she felt his breath quicken and his hands grow restless, then she pulled away and said complacently, "It's a good thing you're not stuck on screwing actresses, dearie, or you'd have a very dry time ahead of you."

The duke straightened his jacket. "You weren't by any chance brought up in Riverside, were you?"

She knelt before him in a rustle of skirts, so that her eyes were level with his. "You don't remember me, do you?" He looked dubious. "Well, why should you? I was just a scrawny girl, wiping down the tables and clearing away the beer mugs at Rosalie's."

"Rosalie's?" It was a name he hadn't heard in years: the tavern where he used to drink and wait with his lover, the swordsman St Vier, for a challenge or a fight.

"I thought you were a prince back then," Rose said. "I made up stories about you. You and him, you was—you were like magic, something no one could touch. I wanted people to look at me like that. And the way you talked —oh, lord…Rosalie let me bring you a drink, once. You were dicing—"

"Probably losing."

"Oh, yes, losing." She smiled. "When I brought it, you said, *Look, a glass of fresh luck!*" She imitated him perfectly. "You took the drink, but the swordsman paid for it, because you were broke. I remember, he said—"

"No." The duke held up his hand. "That's enough."

"It's all right," Rose said. "I never could do him the way I could do you. I used to make the other girls laugh with it…"

"What a good thing I didn't know! I might have had him kill you."

"Never." The Black Rose smiled. "He didn't do women, everyone knew that."

The duke said, "Last year. I sent you my ring, with that note…When you came here and saw me, you must have been surprised."

"Oh, no, Alec. Not at all." Her arms twined around his neck. "Why do you think I came?"

He ran his lips along her cheek. "Revenge on a crooked lover, I thought. Not that I wasn't grateful. I put what you brought me to good use, I assure you. And I'm grateful yet. I won't let Ferris chase you from the theatre."

"No," she said, "you won't."

Through pride and perversity he strove to keep her with him as long as he could, but in the end she rose from the tangle of clothes and said, "Farewell, my prince. Act heartbroken if you can; curse me if you must. I'd rather one curse from your lips than a hundred *boos* from an annoyéd crowd."

He looked critically at her. "Someone else wrote that."

"Of course. I changed it a little to fit the circumstances, that's all." She busied herself with the hooks of her bodice, and he did not offer to help. "I'll do what I can to let them know we've quarreled. You do the same."

On the stairway she found the duke's niece, that peculiar girl with the sword. Rose straightened herself just a little more and adjusted her glow to become once again the Black Rose. "Katherine," she said brightly. "How wonderful to see you again."

"Oh." The girl looked startled. "Hello, there."

"I salute you," said Rose. "You are the hero of the hour."

"Am I?"

"The duke is very proud of you, and so he should be. Remind him of it, when you can. He's sad," Rose said. "I am a little, too." She put her hand on the girl's soft cheek, and Katherine blushed. "I know," the Black Rose said. "It's all so very difficult, until you get the hang of it." She kissed the girl on her brow, and left the Riverside house.

IT WAS NOT FAIR. THE DUKE ALWAYS GOT WHATEVER he wanted. What did he need the Black Rose for? He had the whole city to choose from. She liked me, I knew she did. Hadn't she kissed me in the theatre?

It probably wasn't her fault at all that she'd ended up with him. She was just an actress, and he had money and influence that she probably needed, while I had nothing to offer but my true heart and my sword. Girls were dying all over the city for her. And there she was, patting me on the head and

telling me to cheer up my uncle and look after him. Why didn't she tell anyone to look after *me*?

I didn't go down to dinner; I did not want to see the Duke Tremontaine that night. I found some old biscuits in my emergency hunger tin and ate those. But it turned out I'd missed a meal for nothing; the duke, too, was taking his meals in his rooms.

Or so Marcus told me, when he banged on my door to see what had happened to me.

I opened the door a crack. "Go away," I said. "You're not supposed to be in here alone with me. Betty doesn't approve."

Marcus laughed. "Betty," he said, "is making up to Master Osborne, who knew her back in the old days when he wasn't good enough for her. You don't have to worry about Betty for a while. He's got the keys to the wine cellar, after all."

"Well, anyway, I'm busy. I'm thinking."

"So am I," Marcus said insinuatingly. "I've been planning amusements and diversions. Want to know?"

"Tell me," I said.

"I'll tell you when I've got all the bits worked out. Maybe tomorrow, if all goes well. Meanwhile, I'll have a tray sent up. You must keep up your strength. Then you can practice killing someone. It'll do you the world of good."

He was the most provoking boy.

David Alexander Tielman Campion, Duke Tremontaine, knew that he had annoyed a lot of people. It wasn't fair to blame everything on Lord Ferris. He set his network to make inquiries, first through the usual channels: the University and Riverside. Riversiders got around. Some were virtuoso housebreakers and pickpockets, still others had climbed up the social ladder to become house staff of various kinds. Servants, all but the most disciplined, talked. So did scholars—outrageous gossips all, even those who now worked as tutors and secretaries to the nobility, many of whom Tremontaine had helped out in their starving student days. Spread his nets wide enough and something would turn up that he could use—and, as usual, a number of

things he hadn't been looking for that could be useful later would come to light as well.

The question was, how serious were these strikes against his friends? Did his enemy wish only to annoy, or was this the prelude to something worse? It was not the first time Tremontaine had been under attack. When he'd inherited the duchy quite a few disgruntled contenders had tried to alter the succession through means foul and fair. And there had been others since then. He was well defended, now, with swordsmen and lawyers and everything in between. But what was he to defend against?

He made a list of possible serious foes. Heading it was Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris. It wasn't just that Ferris currently had legitimate grudges against both Tremontaine's lover for spying on him (if he'd found out) and his niece for challenging him. It was also a matter of style. The petty cruelty, particularly directed toward vulnerable women, smelt very familiar.

In the old tales, things always came in threes. So who was next? The duke made his best guess and doubled the guard on certain people who, with luck, need never know that it was there at all. And he sent once last time for the Black Rose, to come in secret and speak to him in his Riverside house, and he asked her to go as his messenger to Highcombe.

ARTEMISIA BEGAN GOING OUT AGAIN TO SELECTED parties. She held her head high, even when she had to sit out dances without a partner. She refused to flirt with any of her old beaux. If the ones who had once clustered around her begging for a smile now thought themselves too good for her, so much the worse for them. She had won her challenge. She was free and in the right. Lydia Godwin's father always made a point of dancing with her, gracefully and superbly, and so did Armand Lindley. Lydia would take Artemisia's arm and walk around the ballroom with her in open declaration of affection. Jane Hetley often joined them, though Lavinia Perry, now betrothed to Petrus Davenant, was making herself scarce. It was going to be that way, Artemisia realized: they would be friends in future only if their husbands got along.

She found herself hoping more and more to see Lucius Perry at these events. Lucius would always talk with her, easy and amusing. He made her feel like herself. He was a good dancer, too, and he never failed to claim her

for a dance and bow deeply when it was over. Even when he was on his way elsewhere, he seemed to make the effort to drop in where he knew she would be. He would stay long enough to dance with her twice—but the third dance, the one that declared him a serious suitor, that Lucius Perry never gave her.

Once, just once, it almost happened. The music being over, Artemisia held on to his hand that little bit longer, and as the next tune started up they nearly merged back into the dance. She saw him pause, and look at her, and realize. He kept her hand, though, as he guided her back in the direction of her seat, and so doing, he slipped his arm around her waist, drew her a little closer to him—She didn't mean to flinch and pull back, she just did it.

"What a clumsy dolt I am!" Lucius said smoothly. "Always stepping on people's toes…"

She felt a rush of great warmth for him then. Lucius understood. As she watched his back disappear across the ballroom floor, off to whatever his next engagement was that night, Artemisia realized that she would marry him if he asked her. She would take good care of him. She'd make a beautiful home, and invite his friends to dinner, and she would see to it that there were always plates of his favorite biscuits, the brown crispy cinnamon ones. They would attend the theatre together, and give musical afternoons, and on quiet evenings she would sew and he would read to her. And he would never, never do anything to her if she asked him not to. Surely he never would.

ROSE HAD NEVER KNOWN A CARRIAGE RIDE TO be so exhausting. It was ridiculous, really; here she was in the lap of luxury—the duke hated traveling, he said, so tried to make his carriages as comfortable as possible, and as far as she was concerned, he'd succeeded. His footmen, in plain dress (as was the carriage, with the duke's escutcheon covered), were attentive but not presumptuous, and the basket of provisions abundant. It was the opposite of what she usually had to put up with on tour, and she should have been luxuriating in it. But all she wanted to do was sleep.

It was especially annoying because she had lines to learn. Henry had decided to mount a new production of an old romance, *Lord Ruthven's Lady*. It was a difficult play, seldom performed, being neither wholly tragedy nor

comedy; but based on the success of *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*, Henry felt *Lord Ruthven's Lady* would draw crowds.

Lord Ruthven is a courtier who offends the king's young sister Helena by his callous and predatory conduct toward women. Helena persuades the court wizard to turn Ruthven into a woman, cursed to remain so until he can gain a woman's love. As a woman, Ruthven realizes he loves Helena and must bend all his skills and powers toward seducing her in his woman's form, or perish of terrible, unslakeable desire unlike anything he has ever known. Rose would play Ruthven once he was transformed. She had seen the play done entirely for laughs, but she had no intention of letting that happen here. While there were certainly comic moments to work with, her Ruthven would be troubled and passionate, vulnerable and confused, and ultimately tragic. By the time Helena finally returned Ruthven's love, she wanted all the ladies in the audience to be moaning with need. Her dear friend Jessica Bell was cast as Helena. Jess would give the princess just the right mix of fragility and backbone, and her slender pallor would play well against Rose's robust stature. Never one to leave a profitable thing unexploited, Henry had insisted on writing in a part for Viola Fine: Helena now had a pageboy with a crush on Ruthven-the-woman, which was gilding the lily with a vengeance, in Rose's opinion. But Rose did not doubt that once the show opened, she would have her pick of noble lovers, passionate adoring women who would make a very nice change from the tortuous intrigues of Lord Ferris and the Mad Duke Tremontaine.

She would, at least, if she could ever learn her lines. Rose had begun studying the part and was finding it almost impossible. Long speeches usually gave her no trouble; she loved the rhythm of the words, but these refused to stick in her head. There was a lot of repartee and wordplay, as well, and she kept jumbling phrases. She had to be word-perfect or the comedy would be lost, and you needed the play's wit to balance the poignancy. *From the top, dear,* she told herself, and put her hand over her playbook and began the transformation scene:

What is this heaviness about my chest?
My arms feel lighter, without strength or power.
Have I been sleeping? Ill? I cannot tell.
What, boy! Attend me here!—What is that sound?
That is not mine—my voice! My voice! My voice!

Oh, she was going to have a good time with this. Triple repeats gave you so much to do. The next line was—was—God, she'd lost it already. She'd lost it, and she was going to puke. She should know better than to read in a moving carriage. But it had never given her trouble in the past. She opened the basket, looking for the wine. There was something in there—something that smelt like—quinces. Quince tart. She loved quince tart, and the duke had remembered, how sweet. But not this quince tart. This one was overwhelming. It was as if she was choking on the very smell of quinces. It sat in her hand, all crispy and golden. She threw it out the window.

The air made her feel better. She took a sip of wine and lay back. Her corsets were too tight. She'd told her dresser to tie them looser, but Emily must not have been paying attention. Her breasts were popping right out of her bodice. Rose lay back and closed her eyes.

She was asleep when the carriage pulled into Highcombe and came to a halt on the sweeping drive before the house's front door, where torches were already lit, expecting her arrival. The duke had insisted that she travel alone, but he had sent an outrider on ahead, and the household's small staff miraculously included women who could take care of her. Muzzy with fatigue, she let them usher her up to a quiet bedroom and unlace her shoes and coo over her elegant dress and petticoats, hang them up and bring her water to wash away the journey. "Put your feet up, my lady," they said in their thick country accents, and she did not correct their assumption—she'd played great ladies often enough, and could certainly do so now—"that'll help they swelling to go down." She had never enjoyed the unlacing of her corsets quite so much. This was the country, and there was no "adoring public" here, no audience except for the mysterious personage she was to meet, for whom the duke had hired her to read the letter she carried. With that duty discharged, she could go with her laces loose for a couple of days; maybe it would ease the ache in her breasts.

Sitting upright in her chair with her feet on a stool, waiting for a soothing tisane, Rose fell asleep again, and was roused by an elderly maid who, unsure of the etiquette for waking nobility, was holding the steaming mug under her nose. The acrid smell of herbs made her flinch. "Take it away," she said; "I don't want it."

The sharpness in her own voice surprised her. These people were trying to be kind. Rose shook her head and laughed. "I'm sorry! I don't know what's wrong with me!"

"That's all right, my lady," the servant said. "It just takes some women that way, is all."

"Oh, no," Rose laughed, "I'm usually quite a hardy traveler."

The older woman chuckled. "Most every woman finds this journey hard, ma'am," and Rose said, "Oh, no," in quite a different tone.

chapter VI

A YEAR AGO, ALEC CAMPION WOULD HAVE TOSSED Lord Ferris's brief note of invitation on the fire.

> *Let us sit and discuss together,* it read, *like reasonable men, matters to our mutual advantage.*

Now the duke's secretary drafted a reply saying that His Lordship of Tremontaine would call upon Lord Ferris at a particular day and time. Ferris

replied that the day would be perfectly convenient, and as to the time, he hoped that His Lordship would not be much delayed.

The duke arrived early. Conceding the gesture, Ferris did not make him wait but had him shown directly into his study and insisted on sending for refreshments. With his good eye, he surveyed the younger man. Tremontaine had taken trouble to dress up for the visit: his lace was very white and there was plenty of it. Instead of his accustomed black he wore the green of the House of Tremontaine, which also matched his disturbing eyes. The duke did not lack for jewels: prominent among them was the oblong ring of the Tremontaine ruby, set with diamonds. Ferris knew it well; his own abuse of the jewel had helped bring about his humiliation at Tremontaine's hands almost twenty years back. For the boy to choose to wear it to this meeting was either provocation or poor judgment—or possibly both.

The duke refused brandy. "Keeping a clear head?" asked Ferris, delicately sipping his. "Good. This needn't take long, and I want you to remember what was said."

"Stop enjoying yourself, Ferris. I'm here and I'm sober, and I want to know what you think you're doing."

"Consider it an invitation," Ferris said cordially. "This is, after all, the first time you have ever bothered to call on me. If it took making a little trouble for some of your friends to get you here, I suppose it was worth it."

"You admit it? All of it?"

"Why not? An invitation, as I said. To come sit down and discuss our situation together, like noble and reasonable men."

"Which involves threatening my friends?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't take me seriously."

"I did. But I am preparing," the duke said, "to revise that opinion. Stop playing and tell me what you want."

"And you'll give it to me?"

"What do you think? If it's reasonable, I'll consider it. If it's not, I have the resources to annoy you very much as you've been annoying me. It's true I have more scruples—but I'm willing to suspend them. I also have more money, you see—lots more money. I wasn't planning to waste any of it on you, but I could be convinced to change my mind."

"Ah." Ferris rolled his glass between his fingertips. "That answers that question. The interference with my wedding plans was just one of your little

pot shots, not the launch of a new campaign."

"I never—" The duke began to say something, but then thought better of it. He settled back in his chair—which Ferris was meanly gratified to note was just a bit too small for the duke's long body—and said simply, "No campaign. Your fiancée wanted out, and it was an easy fix."

"Well, that's all right, then," said Ferris smoothly. It was all coming together, in one of the several patterns he'd laid out against this meeting. He felt the almost sexual thrill of being the one in the room with all the power. The words seemed already written for him to speak. "I have now, as you say, an easy fix for both our troubles. You don't really trust me to stop attacking you where you're vulnerable—or you shouldn't, anyway—and I certainly do not trust you not to make such attacks necessary to me. Even with your great supply of scruples, not even you can always be quite sure what you'll do next, can you?"

The duke glared at him, but said nothing. "So," Lord Ferris went on, "you are going to provide me with a very fine token of your goodwill, which will also recompense me for the trouble you've caused already."

"And that is?"

"You are going to contract with me to marry your niece."

The duke turned very pale, right down to his lips. Then his cheeks flushed, making his green eyes appear to glitter.

"Oh, come, Campion, what else were you planning to do with her? It's a generous offer. In one sweep she is reinstated in Society with a position higher than any she might otherwise hope for. Even your crimes against her delicate girlhood—" Tremontaine started to rise; Lord Ferris lifted a manicured hand "—I mean, of course, only the silly masquerade of sword and breeches—are forgotten in the general haze of romance. We'll say I fell in love with her at the Godwin swordfight. It'll delight the entire city, just like a play—like that swordsman one the Rose is doing now, in fact. Lady Katherine likes the theatre, I hear."

The duke said nothing.

"You will provide her with a suitable dowry, of course. I know you are very fond of her. And should the two of us be blessed with issue—well, I would never presume to interfere with the ducal succession (that's not my place, is it?)—but I know you would take them into consideration, being so fond of the Lady Katherine and wanting the best for all of your family."

The duke sat very still, as if he were afraid to move. He wet his lips. "Are you sure," he said, "there isn't some ruling in the books somewhere stating that once you have slept with a woman it's a crime to marry her great-granddaughter?"

"None that I know of."

"Pity. I'll have to put a motion up before the Council to have one passed."

"Oh, no you won't," said the Crescent comfortably. "There's a fine now for frivolous suits."

"I'll pay it," the duke said. "But it might be cheaper for me just to hire a swordsman to settle the matter and put you out of your premarital miseries."

"Well, now." Ferris leaned back, brimming with his own particular kind of happiness. He'd always known he was ten times smarter than this man, but seldom did he get such a good opportunity to display it. "You might want to think that one through. You see, if it turns out that we are not to be wed, I might want to challenge your niece, instead. Having now seen her fight, I admit I misjudged her ability as well as her persistence this last time; but I don't make the same mistake twice. I can find a swordsman with enough superior skill to mop up the floor with her. There are some serious ones left, you know—they can easily skewer a young blade, even one who somehow learned a few of St Vier's tricks."

The duke said, "I could send her away. Back to her mother's house."

"Oh? Do you think the mother would refuse my suit? I don't. There's some bad blood between you, isn't there? Just what did your noble sister do, exactly?"

"She married," the duke said dryly. "Against my will."

"I am sure you have given her ample opportunity to regret it." Lord Ferris rose, and stretched, and pulled on the bell by the hearth. "You act quickly," he told his visitor, "but you don't always think very quickly. So I'll give you a little time to think over my offer and its ramifications."

"How little?"

Ferris cocked his head. "One day should be sufficient. After that, I will expect your answer, or I may well extend another of my invitations. I will go well guarded until then." A footman answered his summons. "His Grace of Tremontaine requires his carriage. Will you pass the word and see him out? I've Council business to attend to. Good night, my lord."

It was a dismissal, and not a very civil one, from one great lord to another. Lord Ferris's footman was therefore very surprised when the Mad Duke not only tipped him handsomely but gave him a schoolboy's wink before getting up into his splendid carriage. He wasn't called the Mad Duke for nothing, then. The footman couldn't see anything to wink about. Neither could the duke, if truth be told, but he was damned if he'd let Ferris know it.

THE BLACK ROSE COUNTED ON HER FINGERS, AND DID not like the results. The thing was possible, and it certainly explained a lot. She could play Ruthven to the hilt, now, understanding what it was to feel sudden changes in one's body—transformation unwelcome, undesired, imposed from outside her by another person…But could she get through the rest of the Season before she started to show? Could she keep awake? Could she remember her lines? Her breasts felt huge, now that she knew; they were like someone else's, darker and bigger than her own. *What is this heaviness about my chest,* indeed?

The Rose composed herself for her morning meeting with Highcombe's mysterious resident. She was a professional, after all, and Tremontaine was paying her well just to read a letter to some person here, an aged relative, perhaps, and to answer any questions he might have. Whatever her own situation, she could execute this not particularly demanding role with grace, dignity and ease.

When Richard St Vier walked into the room, she let out something between a squawk and a full-blown shriek.

He was unarmed, but she saw him start to make a move to defend himself, and then to realize, and stop, and smile. "He didn't tell you," he said.

"No." Her hands were shaking. She fumbled in her bodice. "Oh, god—I have a letter—I had no idea—"

"Sit down," he said. "It's all right. He's just being cautious, or theatrical, or something."

Rose grimaced. "Well, why not?"

"Or maybe he's annoyed with you."

"He is, a little." Rose sank into the chair by the window, looking up at the swordsman anxiously. "But he told me he trusted my absolute discretion." She laughed shakily. "He must be desperate."

"Do you think he is?" Richard St Vier asked her.

"Annoyed, or desperate?" She tried to recapture her usual lightness. She was not a Riverside tavern girl anymore. She was the Black Rose, the toast of the city, the honor of the stage.

"They go together sometimes," St Vier said; "especially with him." He pulled up a chair. He sat so close that when he breathed deeply, his knee ruffled her skirts. "What does he want?"

She thought of the Mad Duke's plots, his vices and excesses, his quiet rages and his enemies. "You," she said.

"Ah," St Vier said. "What's in the letter?"

That morning, with defiant panache, she had folded it carefully so that it nestled in the cleft of her bosom, planning to whip it out with two fingers and present it to the mysterious resident. If she hadn't squawked before with so much force, it might not have slipped down that little extra way, causing her to have to fish for it with those same two fingers while her other hand kept her stays in place.

"You don't even know who I am," she said.

"Nor do I. You didn't introduce yourself, and I don't like to pry."

That sobered her up. "I'm an actress. I'm Rose." It reminded her, too, that even the neatest stage business sometimes misfired and costumes misbehaved, and then all it took was a quick hoist and a tug to bring the letter out into the light.

Rose broke the seal, and then she stopped. Shouldn't she just hand it to him? "I'm sorry," she explained; "he said to read it to you."

"Yes, please do."

She looked down at the page. "It's short," she said. "One line: *Will you come for Katherine, if not for me?*"

She cleared her throat. "That's all."

"That's discreet," St Vier said. He did not ask her anything else.

"Katherine's a nice girl," she said.

"Yes. I know." He stood very still in the middle of the room.

"He's made a lot of enemies. He doesn't mind it, but they do. I don't think he'd ask if—if it weren't…" Shut up, Rose, she thought.

He looked out the window for a while, and then he looked at her.

"Yes," he said. "I will go. He didn't say how soon?"

"He didn't say anything. But I would make it soon."

"I can be ready in a day or two."

"All right." Weariness washed over her, and the kind of sadness she had spent her life trying to keep at bay. She stood up. "Do you mind if I go lie down?" she asked. "The journey was very tiring."

She wanted to make a good exit, but her balance seemed to have deserted her. She staggered against Richard St Vier, and for the first time in her life she felt the swordsman's hand close around her, warm and firm on her elbow, holding her up. "Are you all right?" he asked. And she thought, *No, I'm not all right. I'm stuffed with your sweet Alec's child!*

She said, "I'm fine. Just tired, is all."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, and she thought somehow he knew, he knew with his supernaturally clever body that had kept him alive through so many fights, through his years in the streets and taverns, somehow it saw her and recognized her distress, her condition, and he knew —but then he went on, "Will you wait and ride back with me? or are you in a hurry to go home?"

Rose closed her eyes. "I don't know. I need to think about things. It's been a difficult season. I might stay here awhile; the rest would do me good. After that…we'll see. Life in the theatre is so unpredictable."

chapter VII

SERIOUS SWORD-PRACTICE MADE ME FORGET TO think in words, so that I didn't always understand when people spoke to me. I had been at it for

some time, drilling first to a rhythm, and then tricking myself with changes, when Marcus came in and said something.

I shook sweat out of my eyes. "What?"

"I've got some time free. It's nearly dark, you'll have to stop soon anyway."

"Yes, all right." I stretched out around the room, carefully polished the sword and put it away.

"Good, Katie. Now that I have your attention, I thought I'd invite you out for a night on the town. What do you think?"

I'd just begun to get my breath back from practice, but now my heart started beating hard again. Something about his jaunty nonchalance, just a little too studied…He was up to something, and he was mighty pleased with himself. "A night out in Riverside?" I did my best to match his tone. "How naughty. How daring. Why not? What's up?"

Marcus negligently kicked the stand so that all the swords rattled back in place. "I'm taking you to Glinley's."

That undid me; I barely managed not to squeak. I had to call on the duke for backup: "Oh, re-eally?" I said, in my best Tremontaine.

"Not just the two of us, of course. Your uncle would never permit it." The look on my face must have been enough. Marcus dropped the pose and grinned at me. "It's Perry. He's here right now, and I happen to know he's working tonight. Want to follow him?"

This was ground I knew; stalking Perry was just something we did. "Why not?" I said, but this time I meant it.

I toweled off in my room and changed into a clean shirt with dark clothes and soft boots, and buckled on a sword; it was, after all, night in Riverside. No one was in the kitchen; we helped ourselves to bread and cheese and our favorite ginger beer, and then went out the side kitchen door to wait for Lucius Perry.

He wasn't long in coming. He wore his old-fashioned hooded cloak, with the hood pulled over his head, and he moved quickly. It was a good time of day to be following someone. Although the sky was still pearly in patches between the roofs, down in the street it was dark. I pretended I was a moving shadow, and Marcus, breathing softly next to me, was another. Only Perry was real, as he passed by other shadows, shadows of women heading for clients, shadows of musicians heading for jobs, shadows of thieves heading for houses, shadows of cats heading for food. We were almost to the Bridge when

Perry turned down a side street and stopped in front of a large and rambly house with a deep-roofed portico.

"So," I said softly, "that's Glinley's."

"That's Glinley's." Marcus was smug, as if he'd pulled it out of the air for me.

Like our house, Glinley's had once been many small town houses, now knit together into one. Lucius Perry hesitated at the front door and then turned round the side as people came out to set torches in the holders in front.

We drew back further into the shadows. "Now what?" I asked.

"He takes off his clothes and wallows in depravity, what do you think?"

"No, I mean—now what do we do? Shouldn't we follow him?"

I heard Marcus's clothes rustle as he pulled back sharply. "In *there*? You can't go in there!"

"Why not?" Even at Teresa Grey's we had tried to climb the wall.

"Because—because you're a lady!"

I stared at where I knew he was in the darkness. "Marcus," I said. "That is completely idiotic. The duke has just spent half a year making sure I'm not a lady."

"Katie—"

"I'm not going to *do* anything, Marcus, I just want to see what it looks like inside." I could sense his whole body taut with resistance. "Marcus, have you been in there already without me?"

"No, I haven't. But I know what goes on in places like that."

"Well, so do I. It's just like the duke and all his friends, isn't it?" He was being so protective, it made me want to do something rash just to show him. But I wasn't going in there alone. "You've said it yourself: it's just full of people copulating. It can't be any worse than home. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything. It's just, you won't like it."

"If I don't like it, or you don't like it, we'll leave."

"Promise?"

"I promise. I only want to see, that's all. Like Teresa Grey's: we'll just look, we won't do anything."

"Good," he said, "because it costs money, and we don't have enough. You're right. It is just a house. A house, and some people doing what people do everywhere. Nothing to worry about. Let's go."

I followed him as he strode across the street into the circle of light and under the dark porch of Glinley's front door. "Now what?" I whispered. "Do we just knock, or what?"

"There's a bell." Marcus turned the plain brass door-pull. After a moment that was just long enough to belie the fact that people were always waiting for it to ring, the door opened. Light from inside nearly blinded us. A stocky, muscular man stood there, plainly dressed, quietly armed. I felt his eyes flicking up and down, sizing up our clothes and our purses.

"Well, hello there," he said to Marcus. "Fancy seeing you here after all this time. What's your pleasure, then?"

Marcus drew himself up. "We're here to see Mistress Glinley," he said haughtily.

That worked. What we were going to tell her, I had no idea, but the man drew back and bowed, and let us in.

The halls were dark and shadowy, well suited to a house of vice. I'm sure brothels uptown are better lit. It was all part of what the duke liked to call the Riverside Flair. We followed the man to a small room hung in red, with a fainting couch prominently placed next to a little round table. He lit the candles. There was a decanter of wine and two glasses on the table. Marcus stood there watching while the man filled both glasses of wine for us. Where did he know Marcus from? Maybe the man had worked for the duke once.

"I'm sure you and your…friend will be comfortable here," the man told him, glancing at the couch. I wondered how many women with swords he saw each week. He looked back again at Marcus, and his face shifted in a sly way. He said, "Very comfortable for you, sir. Tremontaine business, is it, sir?"

Marcus turned his back, and took a glass of wine. "I thought," he said, "you were paid not to ask questions here."

"Oh, no, sir, of course, sir." The man bowed his way out of the room, leaving us in sole possession of couch, candles and wine.

"Well, I'm impressed." I plumped myself down, testing the couch. It appeared to be stuffed with goose down. "That was quick thinking, Marcus. You've got him on the run, cheeky villain. I don't know what we'll tell Mistress Glinley, but we'll think of something, won't we?"

"She'll think we're from the duke." Marcus drank. "I hope she doesn't tell him, that's all."

"What do you think this room is used for?" I bounced a few times, keeping my sword nicely out of the way. "Do you think people come here in pairs, or do they send someone in? Would we both fit on this couch?"

"Quit that." He held me still with both hands on my shoulders. "You're not five years old."

"I'll bounce if I want to. That's what it's there for."

He stood looking down at me, his two hands on my shoulders. "You know, Lady Katherine, if you screamed in here, no one would care."

"I know." I stopped bouncing and looked up into his eyes. "I could say the same to you."

"They'd just think we were having fun."

His eyes were dark, the pupils large in the candlelight. "Well, that's what it's here for, isn't it?" I said.

"Of course."

"Do you want to try anything, then?"

"Yes," he said, so suddenly I had only just heard him when his mouth was down on mine. It was hard and warm and exotic and very, very nice. I kept my arms at my sides. His fingers were still; everything was happening with our mouths, which changed shapes and textures to accommodate all sorts of feelings. My eyes were closed. I felt the velvet under my hand, and I wanted to sink down into it while his mouth and mine explored.

A gentle knock on the door made it necessary to stop. No one might care if we screamed, but one of us did have to say, "Come in."

Nan Glinley was everyone's vision of a perfect mother: small, round, placid and pleasant-faced. She was gowned in grey, and her hair was modestly coiffed in the manner of city women. I could tell from the way she looked at me only once that she knew who I was. But she spoke to both of us. "How can I help you?"

"Um," I said, and Marcus said, "We're investigating."

"My house," its mistress asked, "or yourselves?"

Was it that obvious? I guess it was. With the little sense left to me, I realized that if we stayed in there alone, Marcus and I could very well end up naked on the couch, and that was not what I had come to Glinley's for. "I want to see a man," I said imperiously. "A really, really handsome one. Dark haired, not too young—experienced, that is. Classy, though. Not trash."

"I see." She turned to Marcus. "And you?"

"Me, too," he said swiftly, having caught my plan. "We're together."

"Shall I show you what's available?"

I nodded. We would find Lucius Perry in here, actually see him in place in the halls of Glinley's House of You-Know-What. Why waste the chance? After that, we could go.

"You may select a partner first, if you like, and then we can all discuss what sort of setting you'd prefer, and what combination. Or we can sit down together now and decide in advance—"

"Oh, lord!" I exclaimed gauchely as I caught her drift. "I mean—we just want to look—to see—"

"Ah." Nan Glinley nodded. "Hidden observation? We can accommodate that."

I let out a breath of relief, and only hoped she didn't hear. No way on earth was I ending up on a couch with Lucius Perry, and neither was Marcus.

"Discretion, I think, is key here," she said, "given your tender years. We'll let you go masked while you search. Excuse me just a moment."

Nan Glinley left the room. Marcus and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Hidden observation!" That's what we'd been doing all along.

"We'll never get away with this," Marcus chortled nervously.

"What if they throw us out?" I put my hands over my mouth to keep in the laughter.

"Get a grip on yourself and they won't. Start thinking up a story—"

Nan Glinley came back, carrying a bundle. "You might like to disarm," she said. "Your weapon will be safe here. Unless that's part of your personal preference…?"

She knew perfectly well it wasn't. But she was treating us like real clients. I was impressed. If I ever really did want a little experience, this would be the place to get it, with a nice woman like that taking care of me. I took off my sword with a rueful smile to say of course we wouldn't be needing it in this lovely woman's house.

Nothing was forbidden at Glinley's, but privacy was respected. We were encased in silk capes from neck to toe, surmounted by masks with animal faces. I was a cat, and Marcus was an owl. He cut a caper in the corridor, so that his shadow danced wingéd on the wall. "Come," said Mistress Glinley, and we followed her through the halls.

We started by looking through peep holes into bedrooms decorated in various styles. They were also decorated with young men sitting or lying around trying to keep themselves amused. It was too early for them to be busy, but clearly they were expecting to be very busy soon. One was painting his nails, one practicing the guitar. Another was smoothing oil all over his body; I was tempted to stay and see what happened with him next—but it wasn't Perry, after all.

"No?" Nan Glinley asked us at the end of the corridor.

We shook our heads.

"Then let us try the Flower Garden."

The Flower Garden was amazing: an indoor room with a pool surrounded by plants, strewn with a variety of bodies scantily clad. We picked our way amongst them, feeling almost indecently overdressed, and moving strangely because we had to turn our heads to see anything through the eyeholes of the masks. Cloaked as we were, we had no gender. Bodies of both men and women did what they could to entice us: a languid glance, a flutter of fingers, a roll of the hips. Suddenly it all seemed possible—not seemed, but was—to take one by the hand, go off and learn to minister to desire in perfect safety. I licked my lips. That one…or that one…the golden hair just edging above the trouser line, but how swiftly they'd slip off to reveal the whole…the soft breasts floating unconfined beneath the gauze, to be nuzzled, stroked, explored…

"Come *on*!" hissed Marcus.

"Are you made of stone?" I whispered back.

He said, "They're only whores," as though their very availability rendered them worthless.

We nearly missed Lucius Perry altogether. He was dressed like some nobleman wandered down from the Hill, in black brocade and silver lace. But his face was painted like a mask, skin powdered to white, and his eyes, with blue and gold on the lids, were lined with black, so that they seemed immense. His lips were stained red as old blood. He was sitting solitary by a fountain, staring at the water. He looked very helpless, fragile and alone. It wasn't only his painted face that made him unrecognizable—I'd never seen those qualities in him before. I wondered if he was doing it on purpose, if it was a mask he liked to wear. He did have a choice, after all.

Marcus raised his arm and pointed. Perry's eyes flicked our way, and he rose in one graceful movement. But Nan Glinley came forward and put her hand on his arm and murmured something low to him. He nodded and walked out of the room.

"You like him, do you?" She smiled. "You've made a good choice. And you're in luck; he's got some clients arranged, and he doesn't mind being watched tonight."

Now was the time to tell her, *No, that's all right, we don't want to see any of that, thanks; sorry to bother you, we're just leaving*…Nobody's ever really died from embarrassment, have they? I turned to catch Marcus's gaze so I could pick up his thoughts, but of course the stupid costumes made it impossible. My friend was an owl. And I was amazed to hear his muffled voice saying, "Good," from behind the mask. "I'd like that. I want to see what he does. I want to see how he does it."

Well, if he did, so did I. This was better than anything we'd see at Teresa Grey's—or anything we wanted to see there—wasn't it? The final piece to Perry's puzzle, and practically with his consent.

She led us to a little cupboard of a room. We took off our capes and masks and gave them to her. "I'll be back in an hour," Nan Glinley said. "That should be enough." Well, it should. I could always close my eyes if it got to be too much. I turned my attention to the room.

There was a long slit in the wall, a sort of narrow window covered in mesh through which we could look into a luxurious bed chamber, dimly lit and gloriously appointed. It wasn't very tasteful; it practically screamed wealth and power—or at least, wealth. There wasn't a thing, from firetools to candlesticks to bedposts, that wasn't gilded or carved or ornamented in some way.

In his lace and brocade, Lucius Perry looked like yet another ornament, and not a very tasteful one, either. He sat in a chair next to the bed, as still as he had sat by the fountain in the Flower Garden. Gold candlelight on rich hangings made it look like a scene in a painting.

I wondered what he was thinking. Did he know we were there yet? Probably not, or he'd be doing something more enticing, wouldn't he? Why didn't he have a book to read? When would something happen? Marcus shifted in his seat and I moved away from him; there wasn't much room in there, but we were careful not to touch each other.

We both jumped when a knock on the door to the room broke the stillness. Perry turned slowly. A man came in and threw his coat on a chair.

"Well, hello." Lucius Perry smiled.

I peered at his customer. The man was short and a bit stout; he could have been anyone you'd pass on the street without a second thought. He stood staring at Perry as if he couldn't believe his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Yes. God, you're gorgeous. They were right."

"I'm here for you. Name your desire—or better yet, don't name it, just show me." Perry began advancing on him, but the man held up his hand.

"No, wait. I want to look at you." Perry stopped, obedient. "You are… exquisite. But the paint—the eyes, and whatnot—it's a little much. I wonder if you'd mind wiping it off?"

"That," Lucius said, "I cannot do." As the man drew breath to object, he added swiftly, "But why confine yourself to looking, when you can touch?"

"Yes," the man said again. "Yes. Come here, then." He put his hands to either side of Perry's face, and pulled his mouth down, kissing him. He pulled Perry's head back, and traced his eyes, his cheeks…the paint was smeared all over his face, making the mask all the more effective, but the way he held his body—I watched Lucius Perry melting, melting in a fluid surrender, as though sinking into a water of anonymity…The man's hands were all over him now, opening his jacket, plunging under his shirt, squeezing and pulling on his body, and Lucius Perry flowed with it all, his head thrown back, his eyes closed. He loved being touched. He loved being admired. Glinley's was made for him.

But the client wasn't really interested in Lucius Perry's pleasure. He was undoing his own breeches now, and guiding Perry's hands down to where his tool sprang out. I shut my eyes for a moment, and heard moaning. I peeked through my lashes. Lucius was kneeling before him, obscuring the worst of the view. It was perfectly obvious what they were doing.

"Hmph," Marcus muttered beside me. "He could have had that on the corner for a whole lot less than he's paying here."

"Hush," I hissed. The man dug his fingers into Lucius's hair, and arced his back, and shouted so loud I thought the whole house would come running. But nothing happened. The man subsided onto the bed, and Lucius handed him a towel. The man wiped himself off and started to get up, though you could tell he didn't really want to move.

"There's no hurry," Perry said. "Can I get you something to drink?"

The man drank a glass of wine. From his face, I guessed it was better wine than he was used to.

"Thank you," he said. He began putting his clothing together. "I wish that I could stay, but…" He shrugged. Glinley's was expensive.

Perry nodded. "Come back," he said. "Come back and see me, when you can."

The man smiled. "Don't tempt me. I'll dream of you, first, for a good long time."

He closed the door softly behind him.

So that was it, was it? Did they all do that? A solid hour of this would be the end of me. Our hiding room wasn't very big, and it was dark. I couldn't see Marcus, but I could hear his breathing next to me, shallow and a bit uneven.

"Are you all right?" I whispered. I wondered if we really should have come.

"Fine. Don't fuss."

Lucius Perry was carefully putting himself back together again. Like an actor, he cleaned off his face—and for a moment, I saw the man we knew, his skin pale in the candlelight, his eyes bright. He was staring into the mirror over his dressing table. He turned his face from side to side, examining it as if trying to see what it was that other people saw. He touched his lips, ran his finger down the straight line of his nose, smoothed his eyebrows, stuck out his tongue and laughed. He took out little pots from a drawer and began layering the paint back over his eyes. The colors made him look magical, like a creature in a dream. The last thing he did was his lips, drawing his crimsoned finger across them slowly, savoring the sensation. He rubbed them over and over, until they were saturated with color. If you didn't know about the paint, it was as if he had flushed them with stroking. He picked up a comb and drew it down through his tangled hair, again and again until it lay sleek on his head. Then he peered critically into the mirror and ran a hand through his hair, and looked up.

I had missed the knock. Another man came in. Lucius Perry stood, and bowed to him. The new client was dressed like a merchant, a shopkeeper, perhaps. He looked around the room at the canopied bed, the hearthfire, the tapestry; at one point he even looked straight at us, which gave me a scare, but our peephole must have been part of something like a picture or a

hanging, and I suppose he was admiring it. "Well," he said. "A nobleman's bedroom. I've never been in one of these before."

Lucius Perry drawled, "You'll find it's much like any man's." He sounded quite a lot like the duke, actually.

The client's hands were clenching and unclenching. "And are you much like any man?"

Lucius preened. "I'm better. Look at me. Don't you think so?"

"A better man than I? I do not think so."

"Don't you? Maybe you need a better look."

"Anyone looks good with thirty royals' worth of clothing on his back. Take it off."

"How dare you?" Perry said arrogantly. Oh, he was enjoying himself, even I could tell, being just as horrible as the man expected him to be. This was different from the last one. There was a contest here, and a sort of drama. "This coat alone cost fifty."

"I deal in cloth, you slut. I know exactly what that getup's worth. You've probably passed my shop a hundred times and never looked at me. But you'll look at me now. You'll look at me, and like it." He was breathing so hard, I was afraid he was going to hit poor Lucius. But the younger man showed no alarm.

"I'm looking," Perry said.

"Keep looking," the man growled.

"I'm looking." They were both starting to breathe hard.

"What do you see?"

"I see you. I see you, and I like it. You make me want things I shouldn't want."

"Such as?"

"I want to take my clothing off for you. I want you to strip me naked. I want you to see me the way no one's ever seen me before."

"Your noble friends would not approve."

"My noble friends cannot imagine the pleasure. Strip me. Reveal me."

"Strip yourself," the man said thickly. "I want to watch."

Perry lifted a hand to the buttons of his coat and slowly undid them, and his breeches as well, 'til he stood there in his shirt, lovely as ivory, with the silver lace framing his shoulders.

The man watched, entranced. It was like wizardry: Lord Lucius Perry, who wasn't himself but someone else who looked just like him, taking off layers of disguise until he stood revealed as a painted whore, less himself now than when he started fully clothed in noble's garb. That's what I thought, anyway. He wanted to see how far from himself he could go, and this was how he did it. I hoped someday he didn't lose himself entirely.

The cloth merchant lifted Perry's shirt behind, and stroked him. "Lie down," he said. "You're mine, now."

"I'm yours," Perry sighed, and laid himself facedown on the tasteless, gilded bed.

What they did didn't really seem so terrible, because I couldn't see much, just a back and some legs. The noise was the worst of it, especially at the end.

Beside me, I felt Marcus turn to the wall. I reached for his hand in the dark, but caught only the edge of his cloak. He was shaking.

The man was already up and buttoning his clothes. "Get dressed," he said curtly. "I'll see you next week. Wear something different, though."

"As you wish."

When he'd left, and Perry was washing himself, Marcus murmured to me, "Well. Now I know how it looks from the outside."

"Outside what?" I whispered.

He pulled away suddenly. "Sorry," he said, and flung the little door open. I tumbled into the hallway after him, and found him kneeling over a convenient basin, puking his guts into it. There were, I saw, many such basins, large and ornamental, placed strategically along the hall. I guessed they were used fairly often, for one thing and another, at Glinley's.

I tried to hold his shoulders, but he waved me away. Of course he had brought his own clean handkerchief. "You need water," I said. "It'll wash the taste out. Was it the wine, Marcus? Did it make you sick?"

He sat all scrunched up with his arms tight around his knees. "No. I'd like more of it, actually." His teeth were chattering. "C-can you find me some?"

I looked wildly up and down the candlelit corridor. "Not a prayer. But—" There was a bellpull. I pulled it. The man who came was the same one who had first let us into the house.

"My friend is ill," I said. "We need to get our things and go. I'm sorry about the mess—"

"That's normal," he said. "A little too rich for your blood, sir?"

"Stuff it," Marcus growled.

"Quit being so uppity," the man said. "You may be the duke's own bumboy now, but I'm an old friend of Red Jack's, and I know what you was."

Marcus seized the sides of the basin again.

"You lay off him," I said to Red Jack's friend. "He can be uppity if he wants to." I heard Marcus laugh—it was an awful sound, in the midst of his retching, but it gave me heart. "Now show us to our room," I said, "and make yourself scarce."

The man glowered at me, but when Marcus could stand, he led us back to the room with the couch.

"You won't get much good of him here, my lady," the man said rudely. "Too bad—he used to be the sweetest little tosser on the streets."

"*Out,*" I said, looking for my sword. He left before I could find it—and without a tip, I need hardly add.

My friend sat shivering on the couch. I put my cloak around him and made him drink some wine. "Never mind," I said. I needed to pace, since Marcus wouldn't let me touch him. "He's just a filthy stupid whoremongering idiot. We'll tell my uncle, and he'll have him thrown out on the street."

"No! Katie, no, you can't ever tell Tremontaine about this, *please*, Katie, swear!"

"Well, all right," I said. "You're right. I guess it was a bad idea. But it's over now, Marcus; you'll feel better soon. I'm sorry it made you sick. You couldn't know."

"Yes, I could," he said fiercely. "I knew exactly. Don't you understand?" He was shaking so hard he could barely hold the wineglass, so he knocked it back in one gulp. "You heard the man. And I told you that day, in the garden, but you still don't really understand, do you?"

I was beginning to; I just wished I didn't have to. "It's not your fault," I said. "You were just a kid. It was in Riverside, and you were just a little kid and you needed the money, right?"

"I didn't get any money. My mother's man sold me to Jack when she died. Jack gave me food and a place to sleep, and I worked for him. When I stopped being little and cute, he didn't have any use for me. Someone told him the Mad Duke liked them older. So he took me to the duke and sold me to him."

It was true, then, about him and my uncle, what people said and what I'd refused to believe. I swallowed bile. I didn't know how I could stand it, but I was going to have to. Fear is enemy to sword. I listened, and I kept very still, but I couldn't look my friend in the face.

"Tremontaine saved my life. He gave me a room, and a door that locked."

I let out breath I hadn't known I'd been holding, and drank some of the wine. "Oh, Marcus." I wanted to put my arms around him, but I saw from the way he was gripping my cloak around himself that he didn't want to be touched; he wasn't done saying things.

"He gave me teachers, and books, and—well, you know, everything. I owe him like nobody's business. He's been protecting me all this time; nobody touches me, and oh god god god, after all that—" Marcus was twisting his fingers together—"If Tremontaine finds out I came here after all that, he'll fucking kill me, Katherine. He will. You mustn't tell him!"

"I won't," I promised.

"I mean, it's been all right for so long, I thought I could do this—I didn't think it mattered, it was all about someone else, like I could test myself—just watching Perry—I don't know how he does it, honestly I don't—"

"He's testing himself," I said. "Like a swordsman. It's some kind of challenge for him."

"Well, he can have it. He's crazier than I thought."

"Is there any wine left?" I poured us each another glass, and drank. It made me feel warmer and braver at once. "Let's just go," I said. "I think I can find the main door." I buckled my sword on, a little unsteadily.

"Right." He was still shaking. He turned his dark eyes wide on me. "Do you hate me now?"

"Hate you? How could I hate you?" I put my arm around him, and this time he let me. "Come on," I said; "we're going home."

Glinley's smelt of sandalwood and beeswax and smoke and drugs and bodies. We wound our way down infinite identical corridors, trying not to be noticed. Once we actually stood like statues in empty niches as customers passed by. The halls started looking familiar. "Have we been here already?" I whispered. A door opened, and since there was no niche, we flattened ourselves against a wall. It was Lucius Perry, leaving the room where he worked. He was brushed and cloaked, on his way out. We followed him through the house, dropping back far enough not to be obvious. Once he

looked behind him, so we quickly seized one another in embrace. I buried my head in my friend's shoulder, and Marcus put his face in my hair until we heard his footsteps fade away.

When we got outside, even the Riverside air smelled fresh.

I began to turn toward home, but Marcus held my wrist. He nodded in the direction of Perry's departing back and raised his eyebrows. I shook my head: enough was enough for one night. Besides, Perry was nearly out of the radius of the house's torchlight—he'd be stopping for a linkboy or his own torch soon, and I didn't fancy trailing behind him in the dark. We stood in the shadows of Glinley's, and watched Lucius Perry walk away into the night.

And we watched two men walk after him, faster and faster, and then we heard a loud thump and an even louder shout.

We ran toward the sound, Marcus with his knife and I with my sword. It was one of those little Riverside streets where the houses nearly touch across. We could barely see the shapes of the two men and one more, whaling on one crouching figure who was not quiet as they laid into him.

"Stop!" I shouted, and to my horror I heard one say, "Is that the girl? That's her!"

"Run, Katie!"

With my sword in my hand, I could not run. I just couldn't do it. I knew I could take them on—they didn't have swords, and I did.

"Katie, *please*!"

"Get help," I said to Marcus as they came at me, leaving poor Lucius Perry gasping on the ground—but help was already there.

Men from my uncle's house—a footman and a swordsman, not wearing livery, but I knew them well and had never been so glad to see them. They laid into the three bullies, and they were much better trained and well-armed, besides. I'd like to say I helped, but I didn't—everyone was much bigger than me, and it was street-fighting without any rules—I hung back, and it was over so fast, with two of the bullies running away and the third one kept for questions, hands bound behind him. The swordsman took charge of him and the footman picked up Lucius Perry, because he couldn't walk. We went slowly. I felt much better when the Tremontaine swordsman, Twohey was his name, who was having trouble with his prisoner, said, "Lady Katherine, if you could just give him a good jab in the ribs—with your pommel? Good and hard—that's it, thanks. Come on, you."

My uncle was wearing a bright yellow dressing gown that didn't suit him; I'm not sure it was even his. He stood blinking in the hall at the top of the main house stairs, having been alerted by what I was coming to see was an admirable network that something had happened.

"For once," he drawled, "I try to get to sleep at a reasonable hour, and you bring me—bodies."

"One for questioning and one for bed, my lord," said Twohey cheerfully.

"Not my bed, I hope," the duke said; "that one's a bloody mess—" He saw who it was. "Oh, god. Get him seen to. Now. What the hell do you think you're doing, holding him in the hall like a package?"

"And this one?" My prisoner moaned, so I whacked him in the ribs again.

"Katherine, my dear! I want him for information, not for kickball. Take him down cellar—Finian can work on him. I'll be down later. Marcus, come help me find my—"

"I'd like to go to bed, now, please."

"Re-eally?" the duke drawled, then snapped, "Get up here."

Swaying gently, Marcus met his master on the stairs. I watched them anxiously. Was it all true? Had the duke saved my friend and never really touched him? If he hurt Marcus, I'd kill him.

As if he could hear my thoughts, the duke said coldly, "Katherine. I don't believe this. I leave you alone for one instant, and you debauch my personal attendant."

I felt utterly sick in the pit of my stomach. How did he know? What would he do?

"This boy is drunk," the duke said. "And I suppose that means you are, too. Go to bed, the pair of you. If you wake up in the morning with a bad head, ask Betty for some of that unspeakable green tisane. But don't disturb me; I'll be up all night torturing prisoners."

He stalked off in a blaze of mustard-colored glory. I suppose I was drunk enough to think that it would be a good idea to explain to him that I was not in the least bit drunk—I certainly didn't feel it. Marcus had had much more wine than I; but then, he'd needed it. I watched Marcus go on up the stairs alone. He had very nice shoulders.

"Good night," I said, though there was nobody left to hear me.

LUCIUS PERRY DREAMED HE WAS A TREE, AND that woodsmen were chopping at the bark that was his face. It hurt like anything. Well, now that he knew that trees felt pain, he'd tell his brother to stop cutting the ones on the estate. He was flying now, way above the forest where the trees were, but something was pulling on his leg, and he was all off balance. He fell into the trees, and branches exploded all over his body as he crashed to the forest floor, a wild goose shot full of arrows. They stung him when he tried to move.

Hold still, a deer said. *Drink this.*

It put him to sleep, the deer's drink. When he woke, he was in his own body, lying in a bed. The Duke Tremontaine was bent over his head. Lucius's mouth was all stuck together, and he could see out of only one eye. It hurt so much to move that all he could manage was a feeble moan of protest. The duke pulled away. "I'm not looking for your favors," Tremontaine said. Someone Lucius couldn't see put a spout between his lips—an invalid's beaker, filled with water that drizzled into his mouth.

He heard Tremontaine's voice. "Perry. I am sorry. I know the man responsible for this, and it is entirely my fault."

What happened? he wanted to ask, but his lips were too stiff to form the words.

"I had one day," the duke said. "I didn't know it ended at midnight.—Never mind. You may stay here while you recover. I promise you'll be safe. Or, when you are a little better, I can send you home." The duke went on, something about messages and assurances, but Lucius closed his eyes so he could see the walls of a little white house with the sun on them, and a bowl of roses, freshly blown, on a table reflected in a mirror.

YOUR UNCLE'S BEING A PIG," MARCUS SAID. WE'D BEEN playing shesh in his room all morning because we were not allowed to leave the house. Marcus wasn't really concentrating on his game, so for once I was winning. "He's not speaking to me, and he won't tell me what's going on."

"Because of Glinley's? You didn't—you didn't tell him, did you?"

"Are you joking? He'd have to torture it out of me, and he doesn't have time. But he knows we did something. He just won't say."

"Is he drunk?"

"No, then he'd talk. He just glares at me and says not to bother him. No one in the kitchen knows anything, either—all he's eating is bread and cheese. And meeting with secretaries and lawyers and shady characters, and writing letters."

"It's Perry," I said wisely. "He's probably planning revenge on whoever did it. Do we know who yet?"

"How should I know? He won't talk to me."

"He's got to know. That man in the cellar…"

"He's gone; I've already checked."

"Check."

"I did."

"No, I'm *checking* you. Look to your other wizard."

Marcus took one of my peons. "I knew you'd do that." I ignored the gibe. "We're definitely still locked in," he said. "I think he thinks someone's after us, like Perry. After *you*, I should say."

"And you're just locked in with me to keep me company?" He took my queen. "Oh, dammit, Marcus, I didn't even *see* that!"

"I know." My hand was on the board; he put his own hand over it. His skin was warm, and a little damp.

"Marcus?" I asked. "Are you sorry you kissed me?"

"Not really. Unless you are."

"I'm not," I said. "I'd do it again." His hand tightened on mine, but he didn't do anything. "It's men that make you sick, right? Not me?"

"You don't at all."

"Just because I dress like one sometimes…If that puts you off, I can—well—"

"Take your clothes off?"

"Because I'm really not a man. I've got—well, developments."

"I'd noticed."

"So do you want to?"

"If you do."

I touched his mouth with my free hand. "I do."

This kissing was very different: more like eating, really, satisfying an appetite you hadn't even known was in you until you found yourself with a big mouthful of pleasure. It was as if the minds that had been playing shesh suddenly flew out through the roof. All I knew was what things felt good, and

that I wanted more of them. I had never even imagined Marcus with his clothes off, and now here I was ripping them away to get at more of his skin. I didn't mind when his hands found my breasts—in fact, I encouraged him, and I pushed his head down so I could feel his face and his mouth on them.

We ended up on the rug because we were too embarrassed to get on the bed, and we rolled around on it and stroked each other and knocked over the shesh board (we never could find the black peon, after) and rolled all over each other. Marcus started groaning and saying, "Katie, stop," but I didn't see any reason to, and then he clutched me and cried out hard, and went very still. When he started to weep, I held him, and didn't even mind the mess he'd made all over us.

"Who cares about going out?" I whispered into his hair, and he laughed, then, and I licked his salty ear.

IN A COZY ARMCHAIR IN HIS STUDY, WHERE HE WAS reading a history of the rise of the Council of Lords after the fall of the decadent kings, Lord Ferris received word that David Alexander Tielman Campion, Duke Tremontaine, had arrived at his front door desiring to speak with him.

Lord Ferris smiled. "I am busy at the moment. He is welcome to wait, if he likes."

"Shall I offer him refreshment, my lord?"

"Of course. Nothing too sweet; I believe His Grace likes salty foods. And plenty of wine. He might want some diversion, as well. Why don't you give him this?" He handed the man his book, *The Triumph of the Crescent*. "It might prove instructive."

chapter VIII

THE HOUSEHOLD WAS SO TOPSY-TURVY, THERE WAS a chance no one would notice if we lay on the rug all day. But it was a chance we were not quite willing to take. And so we hunted down all our clothes and put them back on. There would be other mornings, when the duke did not rise early to torture prisoners. He never noticed anything in the morning.

Marcus went out to investigate, while I put my hair back into some kind of order. "He's gone out," he said when he came back. "And we're still not allowed to." He'd brought apple tart; we sat on the window seat feeding it to each other.

We wished we could be sure that what had happened to Lucius Perry had nothing to do with us, but we had to consider the possibility that it did. Maybe we'd led those bullies right to him. Maybe they'd been after us to begin with. One of them had recognized me—though, as Marcus pointed out, I was getting to be pretty well known. But why were we locked in the house now, if not for our own protection? If we hadn't followed Lucius Perry, maybe he never would have been attacked. Unless what happened to Perry had just scared the duke into worrying about us.

Then there was the question of those Tremontaine guards. They had been remarkably on the spot, coming to the rescue like that. Possibly the duke had set them to keep a protective eye on Lucius, or on Glinley's, which was part his, after all. He did have people watching all over Riverside…but maybe—horrible thought!—they'd been there to keep an eye on us. Maybe they'd been following us all along. In which case, the duke knew perfectly well where we'd been. When he got back from wherever he was, there would be ructions.

To take our minds off it, and because the last thing we wanted was for him to return and find us naked on the rug, we went to check on Perry's progress.

For reasons no one could entirely remember, Lucius Perry's nurse was named Gobber Slighcarp, or if they knew, they wouldn't tell us—I mean about his name. Gobber was a very competent nurse. It was perfectly reasonable for him to take care of Perry. He used to surgeon hurt swordsmen, having been thrown out of the College of Physic for unmentionable crimes that no one remembered either.

To make up for what had happened, we tried to make ourselves useful to Gobber Slighcarp. Marcus fetched things from the kitchens. I gave Betty money to go out and buy flowers and scented candles, which are nice when you're ill.

We weren't really eager to see Perry himself. But Gobber came out of the sickroom to say the nobleman wanted to speak to me, and before I could think of an excuse, I was by the hurt man's bedside.

After what I'd observed through the peephole at Glinley's, I couldn't imagine having a conversation with Lord Lucius. But that fled my mind as soon as I saw him now. He didn't look like the same man at all. His face was purple and green. One eye was swollen shut, and his nose was crooked and large and bandaged. And his mouth, his sensual, elegant mouth—

I said, "Oh! I'm so sorry—"

"Not to," Lucius Perry rasped. "You saved me."

"It's better than it looks," Gobber explained to both of us. "It won't heal pretty, but it'll heal all right. Ribs, too—I've seen worse. And if we're careful with that leg, it won't stiffen up too much."

"Come," said Lucius, gesturing with a scraped-up hand. I realized he couldn't see me unless I was near his good eye. "Cousin Artemi'a friend. You know. Mus' marry her."

"Why?"

"Family."

"The family want you to marry Artemisia?" This was awful. He was all wrong for her. And what about Teresa Grey? "But—does she want to? Have you asked her?"

"Ready now," he sighed. "Safe. All m'fault, w'happened. You write her. Ask her to. I'll sign."

Gobber looked at me and shrugged. He had no idea what this was about. But I did. And I wasn't having it.

"I'll write her," I said, and went to find Marcus. He didn't argue, much. And he liked showing how well he could sneak out of the Riverside house without being caught.

Once he left, I went and wrote a letter to Artemisia telling her she was on no account to agree to marriage with Lucius, whatever her family said. I didn't tell her that he was riddled with vice, or that he already loved someone else; I just reminded her that where there was no love there could be no lasting joy. I added that my heart was with her, and I hoped she'd find someone really nice to marry, but if she didn't, she should not marry at all.

Then I did what I should have done ages ago: I went to the duke's chief personal secretary, Arthur Ghent, and explained that Artemisia's family didn't want me writing to her, and might even be reading her letters, so could he please see to it that she got this one safely? Arthur smiled just short of a grin, and said he'd see to it.

Then, in utter penance, and to keep myself distracted, I went and offered to read aloud to Lucius Perry. He let me choose, and I was well into *The King's Hunt* when Marcus returned with the woman from the Hill, the one Lucius Perry truly loved.

She didn't handle it well. Marcus swore to me he really had told her just how bad Perry looked, and that he would get better, but it didn't seem to matter. When Teresa Grey saw Lucius Perry, she made an unhappy sound and clutched at the wall, and Gobber had to make her sit and put her head down. "Oh, no," she moaned; "oh, no…"

I ran and got lavender water to chafe her wrists with. She had very strong and flexible hands; she could have learned to hold a sword if she'd wanted. "It's all my fault," she said. "Oh, what shall we do? What shall we do? Oh, Lucius…"

I held her hands tightly, and got her to look into my eyes. "It wasn't you," I told her. "Truly, it wasn't. I don't know if you know, but Lord Lucius has been working for Tremontaine."

"I know, all right, you curious child," she said to me, which at least was better than moaning.

"Well, then. It was all because of that. He has a lot of enemies, the duke."

"Does he?" she said in that annoying way adults have of humoring children who are telling them things they already know.

"Yes, well, if you know that already, you'll know this has nothing to do with you. It was someone trying to get at our house."

Teresa Grey stood up. Even with her hair all wild and her dress disordered, she managed to look astonishingly beautiful. "Where is the duke?" she said. "Let him see me, and tell me so himself."

Marcus said, "He doesn't know about you yet. We're the only ones who do."

She looked closely at him. "Is that so? And what do you know about me, pray?"

I said, "You are Lucius Perry's one true love. The rest mean nothing to him—especially not the duke. You are a painter, and a writer, and—well, a Lady of Quality."

She stared at me as though I'd lost my mind. "Oh, this is too much!" she cried. "You! You're a girl! Are you some kind of actress, some protégé of his? Am I supposed to be writing a vehicle for you, is that what this is about? Because I'll tell you right now, I'm not doing a thing for him or for anyone until I find out who's responsible for this. Right now, I—I wouldn't piss on the duke if he were on fire."

"Watch it," Marcus said with surprising heat. "Katie's a lady."

She swirled back to Marcus, and then to me, and back to him again. "You. You were the one who delivered those pigments."

He ducked his head.

"Marcus, you rat!" I said. "You did that without me!"

"Were you in on it, too?" she demanded.

There was a strangled noise from the bed. We all jumped and turned to attend to the hurt man. But there was no need. Lucius Perry was laughing.

"Go away," Teresa told us all, even Gobber Slighcarp.

We went. We left them alone together, and it did not even occur to us to try and look in through the keyhole until much later. They were both asleep, his head on her soft breast, and *The King's Hunt* lying open on the floor beside them.

THE DUKE TREMONTAINE WAITED IN A YELLOW-AND-BLACK drawing room that was the height of fashion and reminded him of stinging wasps. He was prepared, he told Lord Ferris's man, to wait until tomorrow, if necessary, as

long as they would bring him a pillow for the night. He ate only nuts from his pocket, and drank only water, but he opened the book Ferris had sent him and after a few pages took out a pencil nub and started scribbling comments in the margins.

The day was well advanced when Lord Ferris admitted the duke to his study.

He did not bother with preliminaries. "You come unarmed?"

"You know I can't fight."

"That, my lord duke, is becoming increasingly obvious. All the same, if you will empty your pockets, please?"

"You're joking."

"I am not joking. We are alone in this room. Let me see what you carry."

Tremontaine glared at him. "Do you want me to trade my marbles for your string collection and broken top?"

"Do you want me to have you searched? Please don't be offended—or rather, be as offended as you like. We both know you're not going anywhere."

The Duke Tremontaine put three nuts, two handkerchiefs, a penknife and his pencil stub on the table. He fished a little deeper and disgorged a button, two calling cards and half of the Knave of Cups with some calculations scribbled on it.

Ferris looked at them impassively. "And where is my contract?"

"Your what?"

"My marriage contract with your niece."

"She's just a girl," Tremontaine said bluntly. "What possible use can you have for her now? She's much too young."

"Early marriages are a tradition in your family," said Lord Ferris. "She's sixteen now—See? I cared enough to check—older, in fact, than your mother was when you were born, like her mother before her. But you don't respect your own traditions, do you? Your family's, or anyone else's. Do you think the Perrys will be pleased to know you've been employing their son as a Riverside whore? Or the Fitz-Levis, for that matter, who are even now trying to foist him on their not impenetrable daughter? Fussy people, the F-L's."

"You give me too much credit," the duke said. "I didn't find him his trade, I found him already at it."

"They might not believe that."

"They can ask him themselves. I've got him in my house—what's left of him."

Ferris laughed aloud. "If they ask him, he'll blame you, if he's got any sense."

"And say he does? What difference will it make? The Mad Duke debauches another beautiful nobleman—again. All yawn. The question is what they'll say when they learn what you've done to spoil his beauty."

"I?" Lord Ferris cocked his head. "What did *I* do?"

"Oh, come, my lord." The duke gave a pretty good imitation of the older man. "Hired bravos aren't that hard to bully information out of."

"Or to bribe. Of course you'd pay some Riverside tough to say I hired him. You've got plenty of money, we all know that." The duke glared at him. "Face it. You may have friends, I'm not saying you don't—all sorts of eccentric people adore you. But you've got no allies. No one who counts."

Lord Ferris picked up a paper-knife, a long silver tool ornamented with a lascivious nymph. He rubbed his thumb along her while he talked. "You've brought this on yourself, you know. What do you think I've been doing for the past ten years? Building alliances, creating systems that will hold me. Yes, it's cost me, but I can get more funds, one way or another. People respect me—and they fear me—and well they should, as you now know. Do they fear you…Alec? I don't think so. They used to, back in your murderous Riverside days. But you've let that particular power go. You've gotten squeamish. Here I am, the elected leader of the land's most powerful governing council. And you are…what, now? An entertainment. A curiosity." He held the nymph up. "For your grandmother's sake, I did try to warn you. Now you're on your own."

"Ferris," said Alec Campion in a curious growl. "You are making me angry."

"Try to control it," Lord Ferris said agreeably, "or you'll never get anywhere in life."

"Very angry," the duke repeated in the same half-musical tone. "It makes me wonder what it would be like to take the battle you've begun to its next logical step. To hire people to attack your people on the streets on no provocation but that they support you. You'd retaliate in kind, of course. I'd need to arm my friends, or have them guarded well. But there are plenty of swords out there, looking for work."

Ferris turned his whole head like a bird, to look straight at the duke with his one good eye. "You would, too, wouldn't you? You'd plunge this city back a hundred years and more, to when liveried houses were fighting each other on the streets, when houses were fortresses, and nobles hired swords to keep from cutting each other down. You'd do all that, rather than capitulate or work out a reasoned, reasonable compromise. You would." Without warning, Ferris slammed his hand against his desk. "*What* was the woman thinking? Making something like you her heir! I admired her, I even loved her for a while, but in the end, she must have been mad."

"They say it runs in the family," the duke said doucely.

"I am hoping that isn't the case."

"Still planning on breeding my niece?"

"We'll merely skip a generation—write you off as a bad egg and then move on. The girl has neither your grandmother's looks nor her charm. Maybe she has brains, though. I trained with the duchess; she passed on to me what she knew of statecraft and the human heart—and believe me, she knew a lot. I've even forgiven her for throwing me over for Michael Godwin; I see now she chose well, he's a capable man." Lord Ferris's nostrils were white, distended. He was breathing rapidly through them. He had lost his temper, but didn't realize it yet. "Or maybe…" he went on cruelly, "maybe you had to sleep with her to get the benefits. I did wonder about you for a while, but now I'm quite sure you never did, or you wouldn't be such a fool."

"I'm crushed."

Eventually, people the duke disliked did lose their temper around him. It was a peculiar talent that he had, and he usually enjoyed it. He waited, now, to see what Ferris would say. The Crescent was working himself up to something unforgivable. The duke wondered what it would be.

"Did she think you'd change, I wonder? Or did she merely think St Vier would keep you in line?"

"We didn't discuss it. Her face was all frozen."

"She thought you'd keep him, though, I'll be bound. I would have bet on it myself. He seemed unreasonably attached to you. What on earth did you do to lose him?"

"How do you know he isn't dead?"

"I know," Ferris said. The ruby at the duke's throat jumped wildly against the lace it was pinned to. "Did he, too, come to find you unbearable? What

would it take to drive him from your side? Not hissing, like your whore of an actress, or mockery, like your fat friend. St Vier was a reasonable man, and gifted. Not a man to be bought, as I found to my own sorrow. Perhaps, when his love soured on you, you trusted to all that nice money you have to keep him by you, only to find it wasn't enough. Really, you'd do better to give your niece to me, before she, too, finds you unbear—"

There was a bronze figurine in the duke's hand, and he swung it at Ferris's head—from the side with the eyepatch, of course. Ferris groaned, and went down.

It was a small statue of a god leaning on a pedestal. The pedestal had sharp edges; the back of Ferris's head was bleeding heavily. His eyes were closed, but his hands were moving.

The Duke Tremontaine considered the statue. It had little bits of skin and hair on it. Now that he'd relieved his feelings with one blow, he didn't really fancy bashing Ferris's skull in with it.

Nor did he like the idea of what Ferris would do if he survived now. His eye fell on the nymph, fallen from Ferris's hand. The long knife wasn't silver after all, just a strong alloy plated in silver. He could tell from the weight. He stuffed his neck stock into Ferris's mouth, to discourage breathing as well as noise.

"Listen, if you can hear me," said Alec Campion. "You were right about one thing. The duchess never named me her heir. She believed she was immune to death. Certainly she was very resistant; when it felled her, she stayed breathing for quite some time. They asked her whom she'd chosen, but by then she couldn't answer. They went through a list of names. Maybe yours was even on it; I don't know. But when they got to mine, she made a sign with her hand, and they took it for assent."

Lord Ferris groaned. The duke pulled open the man's jacket; no need to make this any harder than it had to be. Third and fourth ribs, right in between…He closed his eyes, pictured an anatomy text. Richard always made it look so easy. One blow, straight to the heart—if he liked you.

How many men had Alec driven onto St Vier's sword? His turn, now. Loser of knives, lover of steel…It took more force than he was master of. Ferris grunted and thrashed. I'm going to look like an idiot, he thought, if I don't do this right. He took a deep breath, and then struck home.

The duke did not ring for a servant, simply walked out the door, left the house and started walking back to Riverside. He washed his hands at a public fountain, and if a very tall man in very disheveled, very expensive clothing walking the length of the city was hard to miss, he was, if you knew the proclivities of the nobility, easy to ignore. And there had always been something about Alec Campion at his worst, some air of dangerous negligence, that made even the toughest element give him a wide berth.

chapter IX

AFTER DARK, A SMALL, NARROW CARRIAGE PULLED into the courtyard of the duke's great Riverside house, the horses sweating and dusty from the road. The footman knew better by now than to try to help his passenger out of it; he merely opened the door and attended to the baggage, while the man stiffly eased himself out. He stood for a moment in the courtyard, waiting, or looking around. Many of the windows were lit; in others, light passed from window to window as people hurried through the house.

One of the lights came toward him. "Finally," a young man said. "You're here. He's been waiting for you. Please come with—" He put his hand out, and jumped at the newcomer's reaction.

"It's all right," the man said. "I'll follow you."

IN HIS STUDY, THE DUKE WAS BURNING PAPERS. WHEN the pair came in he looked up but did not rise, just kept feeding things to the fire. "Good," he

said, “you’re here. I was afraid the Bridge might be closed.”

“Not yet. Will it be?”

“Soon, if they’ve got any sense.”

“Alec, what on earth have you been doing?”

“You didn’t get here in time, so I had to kill Ferris myself.” The duke waited a moment for the full effect.

“Did you?” his friend asked curiously. “How?”

“Eclectically. But conclusively.”

“You didn’t poison him, did you?”

“Heavens, no. That would be dishonorable. No, I stabbed him with a nymph.”

The other man laughed.

“I was in his house, and his whole staff knows it. I expect to be arrested any minute. So I’m leaving.”

“Rather than face a Court of Honor? Look, it’s not so bad, really. Did you challenge him first?”

“I forgot. There wasn’t time. But I can always say I did. There was no one else there.”

“You’ll get off, then.”

“Not necessarily. I had to whack him on the head first. Not very convincing as a challenge, even for a lenient Court, which this one won’t be —did I tell you he was also the Crescent Chancellor?”

“Oh, Alec.” St Vier shook his head. “Still, you are the Duke Tremontaine. Maybe you can bribe someone. You have supporters, surely.”

“The whole thing’s too much trouble. And anyway, I’m sick of it here. You were right.”

St Vier considered the fire. “I know.”

For the first time, the young man spoke. “You mean we’re leaving the city, my lord? Why didn’t you tell me? I’d better pack—”

“I’m going,” said the duke. “You’re staying.”

“No, I’m not. Not this time.”

“Yes, you are, Marcus. Katherine’s staying, so you’re staying. It’s all on the desk over there, signed and sealed. Make sure she opens it as soon as I’ve gone. That’s important. Don’t look right now—just find me my penknife—I know I put it down there somewhere, and it’s gone.”

"You're Marcus?" St Vier said. "Why didn't you say so? I thought you were younger."

"He was," said the duke. "They grow."

"So where are we going, anyway?"

"Somewhere nice. Somewhere with bees, and sun, and lots and lots of thyme."

SHE SAT IN HER WINDOW SEAT, WATCHING THE SHADOWS shoot up against the walls of the courtyard as people with torches scurried about with horses and baggage. There was no light in her room. She sat with her knees hugged in her arms, her face pressed to the glass, just tilted so that her breath didn't mist it. It was a play, she thought; it was some kind of play, and when it was over someone would come and tell her what it meant, and what her part would be.

Then she saw him, or thought she did—the man who used to live here and said he'd never come back. He was standing in the courtyard, against a pillar near the well, just standing there looking at it all.

"Master!" Her breath fogged the glass. She struggled with the casement catch. "Master!" He didn't look up. "Master St Vier!" she shouted into the courtyard.

The man turned his head. She couldn't hear what he said. "Wait!" she cried. She bolted down the stairs, around the corridor, around another and out the door.

"It's you!" Katherine called. "Oh my god, it's really you!" She didn't think about whether or not he wanted to be touched; she just flung herself into his arms, and smelt the woodsmoke as he folded her in his cloak.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she gasped. "I'm different, but I'm all right."

"Good." Carefully he unwrapped her from the embrace, and set her before him. "I can't stay," he said. "Your uncle's finally killed someone."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes."

"Are you going to—"

"No. Not this time. I can't stay."

"Please," she said; "I've got things to show you, things to tell you…"

"Let's go inside," he said. "I think that there are things to tell you, too."

IN THE HOUR BEFORE DAWN, THERE WAS A GREAT POUNDING on the doors of Tremontaine's Riverside house. City guard, some adorned with moldy vegetables that had been flung by Riversiders who resented their incursion on their turf, escorted an officer of the Court of Honor of the Noble Council of Lords bearing a warrant heavy with seals that had taken most of the night to get fixed and approved, summoning the Duke Tremontaine before the Court.

A sleepy watchman opened the door. Like most of the household, he'd only just gotten to bed.

"What in the Seven Hells do you want?" he asked.

"By order of the—"

"Do you know what *time* it is?"

"None of your cheek," the officer barked. "Just fetch Tremontaine, and be quick about it."

He wasn't invited in, but he stepped over the threshold anyway, as did as many of his guard as would fit in the tiny old hallway. He wondered if he would find the Mad Duke wild and bloodstained, or in his cups, or draped with boys and unmentionables.

A young girl appeared on the stairs above them. She had wrapped a velvet cloak of green and gold over her nightgown, and her long brown hair was plaited for the night.

"Yes?" she said.

"Young lady, I am here for Tremontaine. If you could just—"

"I am the Duchess Tremontaine," she said. "What is it you want?"

CODA

HAVING DEFEATED HER SWORDMASTER IN A SERIOUS bout that morning, and being in the process of acquiring a new dress that afternoon, the young Duchess Tremontaine was in excellent spirits. She stood in a sunny room overlooking the gardens of Tremontaine House encouraging her chief secretary, a balding young man named Arthur Ghent, to read her correspondence to her. The duchess's personal aide was ensconced in the window seat going over her farm books, eating oranges and lobbing bits of orange peel at her when he thought no one was looking, as she simultaneously tried to avoid them and to hold still for the modiste who was fitting the gown, while her maid begged her not to stand there making a half-naked spectacle of herself in front of everyone.

"I'm perfectly covered up, Betty," the duchess said, trying not to tug at the bodice, which pinched. "I've got yards of sarcenet over quite a lot of petticoat and corset, and a very modest fichu—ouch!"

"A thousand pardons, my lady," the modiste said, "but your grace's waist has gotten smaller since our last fitting, and it must be taken in."

"It pinches," Katherine fretted. "And the sleeves—they're so tight, I can hardly move my arms. Can't you open up this seam here?"

"It is not the mode, madam."

"Well, *make* it the mode, why don't you? Attach some ribbons right across here—"

"Very seductive," the duchess's personal aide piped up from the window seat.

"Oh, honestly, Marcus. It's just my arm."

The modiste consulted with her assistant. "If my lady will permit us to remove the upper half of the garment, we will see what can be done."

The duchess sighed. "Close your eyes, Arthur. Betty, hand me my jacket. There, is everyone happy? Now, please! Lydia is coming to take chocolate soon, and then Lord Armand and the Godwins are joining us for dinner before we go to the concert—oh, hush, Marcus, it's very lofty and elevated music, not *tweedle tweedle*, Lydia says so—and then Mother's arriving tomorrow, but who knows when she'll really get here—oh, Betty, make sure they haven't forgotten the flowers for her room—and I promised Arthur I would get this business done before then, so now really is the only time. Go on, Arthur."

Arthur Ghent picked up a stack of colorful butterfly papers. "These are next month's invitations—but as time is short today, they can wait 'til last. Let's start with business." He unfolded a plain note from another pile. "The Duke of Hartsholt says you can have his daughter's mare at the price agreed, but only if you confirm it today."

"Tell him yes, then."

"You'll fall off," said Marcus dourly. "You'll fall and break your neck."

"I certainly won't. I grew up riding all over the countryside. This is nothing. But—it does seem a lot for a single horse. Can we honestly afford it?"

Marcus pretended to consult his calculations. "Hmm. Can we afford it? Only if you give up brandy."

"I don't drink brandy."

"Well, then. Get a horse. Get ten if you like—they don't eat much, do they?"

"Ahem," said Arthur Ghent, shuffling papers. "This should interest you. The Trevelyn divorce. Speaking of things you can afford. The lady has produced a written statement of cause for petition, and the lawyers have found an obscure law protecting it from any public scrutiny until the matter has been privately settled—that ought to give the family pause."

"Excellent. What about Perry's pension?"

Arthur extracted another letter. "Lord Lucius sends a note of thanks. He and Lady—Miss, ah, Grey are resident in Teverington. He writes that he is walking greater distances, and hopes soon to be rid of his cane."

"Oh, good! Put it on the stack for me to read later. What about my play?"

"Now as to that…" Arthur Ghent glanced at the door to the room. But the play, if he expected it to materialize, was not there.

"My lady?" The modiste and her assistant eased the duchess back into the top half of her new gown. Ribbons crisscrossed the seam below her upper arm. The duchess flexed her arm, trying a full extend and a riposte, while the modiste stifled a protest that gowns were not made to fight in and she truly hoped the duchess would not so tax her creation—

"This is such lovely fabric," the duchess said. "It moves very nicely, now. Do you think you could do me a pair of summer trousers in it, as well?"

"Oh. My. God." Artemisia Fitz-Levi stood in the doorway, a fat leather-bound tome in the crook of her arm. Her hair fell in perfect ringlets as always, but there was a smudge of dust on her forehead, and her apron, worn to protect a striped silk gown, was dusty, too. Nonetheless, Arthur Ghent straightened his jacket and ran his hand over what was left of his hair and bowed to her. "Katherine." She stared at the gown. "That is—that is beyond—Oh, Katherine, every girl in town is going to want those sleeves!"

The modiste permitted herself a smile of relief. In matters of fashion, Lady Artemisia was seldom mistaken.

"Do you think so?" Katherine said shyly. "I don't want to look silly."

"You won't." Her friend kissed her cheek.

"I'm doing papers with Arthur, and we're almost done." Artemisia stood back against the wall, the image of a useful person staying out of the way. "Go on, Arthur." The secretary handed the duchess two finished letters to approve, which she read standing. "Nothing from my uncle?"

"Nothing new. As far as we know, he and Master St Vier reached the sea and sailed as planned. The next letter may not reach us for some time."

"If he writes at all."

"He'll write," Marcus said. "When he runs out of money. Or books."

"Well, then. Is that it?"

"That's it for now, except for next month's invitations—"

"Invitations?" Artemisia butted in. "For next month? But my dear, no one will be in the city next month! No one who matters. Everyone goes to the country. Here, you'd better give me those." She held out her hand to

Arthur Ghent, who delivered the invitations to her with a deep bow. "I'll just see if there's anything worthwhile, though I'm sure there's not." She shoved them in her apron pocket. "You won't want to stay here either, Duchess. Now, I've already gotten a list of your country houses, and I've noted the five most suitable for you to choose from. I can fetch my notes if you'd like."

"Not just yet." Katherine was still a prisoner of laces and pins. "Have you got *History of the Council, Book Four* there? I think we can get a bit more in while they finish my fitting."

Artemisia waved the book in the air, and a wad of paper fell out. "Oops! More invitations—"

But Katherine had seen the plain and heavy sheets. "It is not! It's my play, you wretch—it's the first act, isn't it? She's sent it!"

Artemisia and the secretary exchanged glances; hers was roguish, his helpless. "I was saving it," Artemisia said primly, "until we got to the end of the chapter on jurisdiction reform."

"Are you mad? My first commission? Read it. Now!"

"Yes, Your Grace." With a rustle of skirts, Artemisia seated herself in a sunny spot by the window, aware of all eyes upon her. She carefully unfolded the heavy sheets, thick with writing in a clear black hand, and began:

"'*The Swordswoman's Triumph*. By a Lady of Quality.'"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IT TOOK ME QUITE A FEW YEARS TO WRITE THIS BOOK, with starts and stops along the way. Many people encouraged me, and all deserve thanks. I hope I will not leave anyone out, but lest I hope in vain: *Thank you, all. You know who you are—even if I don't.*

Careful readers Holly Black, Gavin Grant, Kelly Link, Delia Sherman and Sarah Smith (the Massachusetts All-Stars) gave me the benefit of their whip-smart brains and nuance-sensitive souls this past year. Justine Larbalestier roused Katherine from her sleep in the file drawer and listened to me read for hours as I shuffled through dog-eared manuscript pages until I fell in love again. Eve Sweetser is one of Tremontaine's very oldest friends, and proved true once more with keen insights and wise suggestions. Paula Kate Marmor made me a promise and kept it. The *Rouges' Ball* was Skye Brainard's idea. Eluki bes Shahar drew pictures. Debbie Notkin championed the Ugly Girl. Christopher Schelling made me do it before the smoke was cleared and Julie Fallowfield undoubtedly wants to know what took us so long? Mimi Panitch is an invaluable Serpent Chancellor and always says the right thing. Patrick J. O'Connor is generous with both love and erudition. Other wise and patient readers included Beth Bernobich, Cassandra Claire, Theodora Goss, Deborah Manning, Helen Pilinovsky, Terri Windling and of course my editor, Anne Groell.

Many people on LiveJournal generously shared their knowledge of trees and ducks and pregnancy. Joshua Kronengold and Lisa Padol did the fact-checking for an imaginary country; any slips or omissions are mine, not

theirs—they did try to warn me. Nancy Hanger is one copy editor in a million. Office Archaeologist Davey Snyder dug me out large blocks of uninterrupted time.

Gavin Grant and Kelly Link gave me a country retreat to write in when I needed it most, and so did Leigh and Eleanor Hoagland.

Finally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to British writer Mary Gentle, who introduced me to Dean Wayland, who introduced me to the true world of the sword. If not for him, I would not really understand how sharp a sword is and how dangerous; how hard it is to get one to hang properly on your hip, and how easy it is to stand perfectly still while a man with no central vision takes a swing at you with one.

This book and the author owe much of their present delightful existence to Delia Sherman, the perfect editor, lover and friend.

The Man with the Knives

ELLEN KUSHNER

HER FATHER HAD TOLD HER A STORY about a sailor who fell out of love with the sea, so he put his oar up on his shoulder and walked inland far and far, until he finally met someone who looked at the oar and said, "What's that thing you're carrying, friend?" and there he stayed. Her father told her he had done much the same thing himself: crossed from the mainland to the island, and then walked inland through the hills and forests until he found a place where no one could read a book, and settled there with his little daughter. He gave the villagers what he could in the way of physick, and taught Sofia to read and to do the same. Her father was gone, now, and here she was, alone with them all, with her goats and her garden at the edge of a village full of people who had never read a book.

And so she remained, not getting any younger, until the man with the knives appeared.

He was going to die here, he was going to cough up his lungs and shiver away to nothingness in a place where no one knew his name. When he fled the house by the sea he had taken his rings with him. They told the story of who he was, but here they were a book no one could read. He kept them in a pouch inside his shirt, along with his surgical knives and two books on anatomy, plus a hunk of dry cheese he was too weak to chew. He was going to die here in the forest of someone else's land, like an old crow or an abandoned dog. Then he saw the light and thought, "Under a roof, at least."

The man on the doorstep could barely breathe, let alone talk. She was used to sick villagers turning up at odd hours, but this one she didn't recognize. He was not young. His face was gray, and he was soaked and shivering. He couldn't hurt her.

"Come in," she said.

For a moment he took his hands away from his mouth and his chest, held them open to her in an odd gesture that seemed to say, "I have nothing." Then he doubled over onto his knees, hacking and gasping for breath. She practically dragged him to the fire, where water was always boiling. "Take your clothes off," she said, and he laughed, pounding his chest for air. She handed him a dry blanket and turned pointedly away from him, rummaging for syrups and compounds. What she gave him to drink made him fall asleep right there by the hearth, clutching her old gray wool blanket, the one Eudoxa had given her for saving her baby, who was now a mother herself.

He was in the earth he was in the earth someone was trying to bury him and pouring earth strange earth into his lungs he couldn't breathe and Shhh, said the sea washing over him, Shushh, it's all right, sleep now…It was only sleep, not death.

She touched his head. His hair grew thick, but was all patchy and uneven on his head. She checked to see if he had mange, but that wasn't it. Someone had cut chunks of it off, with a knife, maybe?

They brought his lover up from the sea, from the rocks under their window. He had heard nothing, would never know if he had cried out as he slipped from the rocks. The sea roared too loudly there. It had been their bedtime music for years, the sea at night, and by day, the bees in the wild red thyme in the mountains above the house.

They told him, He's dead, lord, and he said, No, never. He is not friend to death. Death fears him. They told him he could look, and he moved through the colonnaded porch and suddenly Marina, the housekeeper, stood in the way saying, Lord, don't look, but he looked past her and saw, no blood, no blood no blood, just something very very broken, and no blood at all so he took the nearest sharp thing and ran it down his arm, and they bound his arm saying it was too much, too much too soon, time enough for that at the burial and he started shouting, What? What? Are you insane? but he was using the wrong words; their faces showed they did not understand him.

Usually she touched her patients only enough to diagnose and treat them, leaving the nursing to the women of the family. But here, alone, she was all there was. And so she bathed his body, like a mother, or a wife. He was modest; he'd tried to stop her. But he stank, and she wasn't having that. She told him he'd like being clean, and she put wild red thyme in the hot water for him, to help clear his chest. He wept as the scent rose.

Everyone let out their few drops of blood, and clipped a bit of hair to lay on—to lay on the—He'd let his blood already; he took the knife and hacked at his hair, the hair that had lain across his lover's breast, tangled in his hands and covered his eyes—

"Do you like it?" he'd asked, when they came in sight of the island for the very first time.

"I can see colors, some. It's beautiful."

"Where do you come from?" she asked the sleeping man, who coughed as he slept. To her alarm, he turned his head to her, opened his eyes, and said clearly: "I have knives." But that was all; he'd been dreaming her and her question. His eyes closed again, his head turned away.

The knives were not to sever him from his past, or even to separate him from other people They were to go deeper, see more, know more. He didn't want to hurt anyone, not even himself, anymore. Not here. Not on an island where honey ran sweet in the comb, where the bees sang one kind of song in sweet-smelling thyme, and the sea sang another against black rocks below the white house they made together, a long porch to shade them from the sun, and windows open at night for the crash and hiss of the waves, to remind them that they were on an island, that it would take a ship with sails to find them, or to take them away.

It was strange to find she did not ask his name. She thought he would not willingly give it to her. Maybe she simply didn't need it, since there were only two of them, alone there in her house away from the village. It was a quiet month, with no babies born, no sudden fevers or falls from rocks. After his storm, the weather was benign.

If he could have torn out his own eyes to stop the visions coming, he would have done it. But he saw more sharply with his eyes closed: his lover under the earth, in it, part of it, defenseless and undefended. With nothing else to see, that's what he saw.

She saw: The day he breathed most deeply. The night he slept without waking. The night he slept without screaming. The morning he hauled himself up onto his feet, the blanket wrapped around himself, and silently took the bucket from her hand. The night he moved his bedding out to the shed, by the goats.

The day he found the soup was burning, and cleaned out the pot, and made soup fresh.

No one else knew that she actually burned soup, though she was sure they all suspected it.

He staggered away from the place where the vision was the sharpest, stumbling over rocks, through the brush that grew along the sea and away from it, up into hills with forests where no one would find him, through villages where no one knew his name. He ate what they gave him. His useless body he gave to the wind and the rain. But they spat it back at him. And so he took it along to the next farmstead, the next village, where people asked who he was and what he wanted, and he had no words for them.

The night she touched his chest, to see if the lungs were clear, and touched his brow to see if the fever was gone, and touched his throat to see if the breath was strong.

It had been night. Night, and the wind. He had not heard his lover leave the bed, had not even felt his weight shift away. His lover often went for walks at night; it was not much darker to him than day. He liked to fight the wind along the cliffs above the waves.

The night she touched his brow to see if the skin was cool, and touched his lips to see if he felt her there, and touched his face to see how he held her gaze.

The waves stopped roaring when she touched him. The world grew very small. There was nothing inside him but what she was looking for.

When she gazed at him, she saw no one he knew.

Already she knew his body well, and so she was not astonished, when she lay in his arms at last, at the whiteness of his skin where the sun had never been. She was barely astonished to be there at all; it was as if his body had been calling her from the start, glowing like candleflame even beneath his rags, and she the moth drawn to the heat of his skin, his white, fine-grained skin, his long and supple hands, his sharp and delicate bones, his harsh and fallen face with its green eyes, a green like nothing else she'd ever seen in a living being.

He let her explore him, let her discover herself through him. It was as if she was reading a book, soaking up learning, following letters with her finger, spelling out new words with her mouth.

She said, "What is your name?" He was silent. He didn't want to hear those sounds again.

"Your name?" she asked gently, again. "Can you tell me?"

He shook his head.

"What shall I call you, then?"

He made the sound "*Camp*-ee-un."

"*Campione*? Is that good?"

He laughed and shook his head again. "No. Not good. Me."

"My name is Sofia."

"*So*-fya."

"Yes. I'm a physician. I can read. Can you read, Campione?"

"Yes. I have reading things."

"Reading things? You mean, you have read things?"

"No, no!" Again the shaking of the head, and this time he used his hands as well, spreading the fingers as if he'd dropped something he couldn't find. "Reading—to read—small-from-trees—what word?"

"'Small-from-trees'—do you mean books? You have *books* to read?"

He nodded. "I show you." So that was what was in the bundle tied up with rags, the bundle he brought that she had left alone, partly to honor his

privacy, and partly, though she hated to admit it, because it was so disgusting. Inside was cleaner cloth, and then…the books.

Anatomy. Drawings of the insides of people—truths she'd glimpsed the ragged, colorful facts of more than once as she worked to save someone, but here they were, laid out in black and white like a map. Dispassionate and true. And also in black and white, patterned unrecognizable, were letters making words she did not know. His language, his words.

She could barely speak. "Who made these? Where did you get them?"

He shook his head.

She spoke. He listened. He found words at need. When he was alone, he thought only in the words that she would understand. To look, to feel, needed no words. What she wanted, and what she gave. What he could give her now.

"I am not young," he would murmur regretfully into her hair. His speech was broken, oddly accented and missing words, but that phrase he knew. "Sorry. I am not beautiful now."

She wanted to tell him men were not supposed to be beautiful, but "You are to me," she'd say, speaking the truth.

He spread his hands open, lacking the words to argue, just laughing ruefully, as though that were refutation enough.

"You see me," she explained doggedly, wanting to convince him. "And I see you."

He stiffened against her embrace, as though she'd angered or insulted him; but she waited, and he relaxed again, melting against her bones.

"You not know me," he muttered.

"True. It's funny that you make me happy."

"Funny laughing?"

"No." She chuckled. "Well, a little. Funny—" She tickled him, and delighted to feel him squirm like a child—"Funny like strange."

"I am stranger."

"Yes," she said; "you are that."

He knew that she had brought him back to life. When he felt the sun on his arms, when he smelt sage and lavender and rosemary as he turned the earth in

her garden, when he smiled because she called to him across the yard, he knew he owed her everything. She remade the world.

When he gave her joy, sometimes in his own release he'd howl like a woman in childbirth. She had witnessed that sort of pain enough that it scared her. But she learned that it was over a moment later. Herself, in joy, she sang: long, loud summer and midwinter carols she hadn't known her throat was capable of.

"Why don't you sing?" she asked him bravely once, her face buried in the fold between his armpit and his chest. It took him a long time to understand her—and then he answered, "Most men don't."

Once, though, he shouted out a word—screamed it, pleading with his body and the night before he fell down onto her, dense and heavy as clay. She tried to hold him, but he rolled away from her, shielding himself with palms outturned, warding off something only he could see.

She said, "My love?" and he gasped, "Yes, words—words to me, please —"and, baffled, she started to sing, a silly children's song about a goat on a hillside. He drew in deep breaths, asked her a question about what a line meant, and was himself again.

The word he'd kept shouting out was his own language. Was it a name, perhaps? As sometimes she cried out his in her pleasure?

The next day, while she swept out the cottage and pounded herbs into paste at her workbench, she thought about the fact that there had been others. Others before her. Did she mind that she was not his first love, though he was hers? Did she care? She cared a little, she decided. She did not like to think of him loving someone else. But it was entirely unreasonable to *mind*.

"My hair, so white—"
"I like it. Was it darker once?"
"Yes. More darker, yes. Old, now. Bad."
"You are not bad. The goats like you. You take very good care of them."
"Goats…"
"Say it. Say, 'I am good.'"
"I am goat."
"No, *good*."

"You. Are. Good."

It couldn't last, and she knew it couldn't last. It was her life, after all, to be woken at all hours, to be summoned urgently to human horrors and discomforts; even he couldn't change that. When the knocking and shouting outside the door began, smashing their bubble of dark and cozy sleep, she rolled over, untangled and pushed him away, fumbling for her nightgown and a blanket to go to the door.

"Come quick!" Markos, his face flushed in the lantern light. "Oh come quick, please come, we've found him—"

She hadn't even known a man was missing. No one had told her, or asked her to join the search.

Sofia dressed in a blur, by the light of a lamp her lover must have lit. She found her bag of bandages and salves by rote, and was out the door with Markos. A second man came behind them, the tall stranger. He followed them to a house, where old Stephan was laid out on the floor, moaning like the wind.

Sofia knelt. They brought her light. They kept trying to tell her what had happened. She shut out the sounds and only looked and felt. It was the leg, the left leg. Around the knee was horribly swollen. Broken? Stephan shouted when she tried to move it.

Sofia closed her eyes. Behind them she saw, clear and black and white, the diagram in Campione's books. The knee, and the threads that connected the joints under the muscles. And then she knew.

When it was finished, the last bandage neatly tied, and Stephan nearly drowned in wine and snoring happily, dawn was breaking. By the gray light she saw Campione accepting a cup of hot tea. But he didn't drink it; he gave it to her. The whole house watched while she drank it, and then the women kissed her and rubbed her hands with cloths dipped in lemon water.

"Who's this, then?" Old Marya nodded at the tall stranger.

"My servant," Sofia said quickly, before she could think. "He helps me with my goats. And carries my things. He came to me in the rains, looking for work." Was she talking too much? "He sleeps in the goatshed. I let him sleep there."

"Is he mute?"

"Sometimes," Campione answered.

Marya laughed, displaying all that was left of her teeth. "You should mend the healer's roof. Just stand on a goat; you're tall enough you don't even need a ladder!"

Campione smiled thinly and ducked his head. Sofia could tell he'd barely understood one word.

The language was a mask that he put on, like those masks they had for the crazy torchlit parties on the streets of his old city, hiding his true face. Weirdly, masks transformed not only faces. When they tied theirs on, his graceful friends became tottering old men or prancing beasts, mincing maidens or loping fools. The mask went deep.

Not deep enough. He wanted true transformation: to lose the memory of torches, friends and streets—to forget there ever was a mask at all. To become the thing he mimed. To lose what he had been.

"When I was a girl, after my father died, I found a bird dead in the wood. I opened it with my knife, then and there, to see what was inside."

"Yes?"

"I've never told anyone this."

"Tell me."

She did know other stories. The one about the girl whose lover came to her every night, strong and lovely in the dark. Her sisters scared her into burning him with light—and then began the girl's sorrows, and her wanderings.

The girl in that story was a young thing, though, with friends and family she thought that she could trust. Sofia was a woman, and kept her own counsel.

The villagers asked him: How are you? and he said: Well. They asked him, Where is your lady? and he said: Garden.

They asked him, Where do you come from? and he said: I don't understand.

"*Where do you come from?*"

It trembled on her tongue a hundred times a day, but she never let it take shape in the air between them, even in the dark when her tongue was

velvet night on the star-spangled sky of his skin. Instead she said, "I am happy. I am so happy with you. I never thought I could be happy like this."

He didn't really have the words to argue, and finally he stopped trying.

On the other side of the world, on the other side of sleep, was a city he had loved with his whole heart. There came a time when his shadow began to stretch across it more and more, taking up too much room, until it wasn't his city anymore. His city was one where he and his lover lurked, notorious and indecipherable.

They'd needed a place where they could be unknown again, the peerless swordsman and the mad aristocrat. A place that didn't need them, didn't care how they had held men's lives in their hand; the swordsman, flawed, turned recluse, the nobleman, overreaching, turned rogue. They needed a place where they could matter only to each other. An island, with a house above the sea.

It had been sweet, so sweet. He thought he'd gotten it right, this time. He thought they could be happy, alone. Hadn't they both been happy? Hadn't they?

They brought him up from the sea, no blood no blood. The dead eyes would not look at him.

During the daylight, they were careful not to touch too much. Her cottage was isolated, but not remote. Anyone could come running up at any time—and that is what happened, on a bright, clear afternoon. Sofia was trying to mend a basket with reeds, so that she didn't have to ask someone in the village to do it for her again, and Campione was indicating they might need to be soaked in water first, when they heard a rustle, and a cry, and it was young Antiope, wailing that her husband had fallen, fallen from a tree nearby, gone high in a tree to pick lemons that she fancied in her condition god help her, while everyone else was picking olives, and now —and now—

His friends brought Illyrian, staggering between them, gasping for air. Sofia got his shirt off, laid him down, felt his ribs. His chest moved in and out as it should—but he was choking. It was something inside him, something she couldn't feel, something she couldn't see. Illy's lips began to turn blue. Unable to breathe he was drowning on dry land.

Campione was beside her, holding something. A book? Couldn't he see it was too late for drawings and diagrams? He opened it. It was a case, a case

full of exquisite knives.

"Please," Campione said. "Hold." He didn't mean the knives; he meant Illyrian. Sofia took the boy's shoulders. She watched in horror as Campione drove the little knife between the boy's ribs.

Antiope screamed and screamed. Campione shoved a reed into the wound, and blood gushed out of it. But before anyone could attack the man, Illyrian breathed. A great *whoosh* of air into his lungs, and the color returned to his face, while the blood poured out the reed.

Campione shrugged. "Please," he said again; "hold."

He meant the reed, this time. Sofia took it from him, careful to keep it in place, watching, fascinated, as the young man breathed steadily and the blood drained out of his chest.

Illy's young wife covered his face in kisses. Their friends stood a respectful distance from Campione, who took his knife to clean.

His hands shook, putting the knives away. He had his back to them all; they couldn't see. They'd think that he had done all this before.

They moved Illyrian into her house to watch all night, watching his breath for when the blood returned, to unstopper the reed and let it out again. A rib had broken inside, and pierced a vein, it seemed. She fed him wine mixed with poppy, and as the dawn came, Illy's color deepened, rosy, like the sky, his breath quiet as dawn wind, and the bleeding ended.

Campione sewed up the wound his knife had made. She felt sick, sick with love for him and sick with wanting to know all that he knew.

He'd taken up something new to study, now that he had time. How amusing, here on this island, to be the one who wielded the steel! The little instruments, sharp and precise. You needed sure eyes and a steady hand. He hardly dared to use them, but he read the books and tried. He wasted paper tracing the diagrams, slicing them with a scalpel taken from its velvet case, small and fine as a pen. He modeled chests and legs and stomachs out of wet clay, made his incisions and excisions, grumbling at how hard it was to clean the knives afterwards, while his lover laughed at him:

"You should have let me teach you the sword, back home, after all. It's so much easier to clean."

"For your man," they said now, when they brought her a chicken, or some cheese, or a bottle of red wine. "Be sure you share it with the man with the knives."

She did not ask to look at the knives again. He never took them out when she was there. But she knew the knives came out when she was gone. He would show her when he was ready, she thought. She could look at his books, and study them, and wait.

He cried, so, in his sleep.

His lover often went for walks at night; it was not much darker to him than day, and there were fewer people about. He liked to fight the wind.

Night, and the wind. He had not heard him leave the bed, had not felt his weight shift away.

Hadn't they both been happy? Hadn't they?

In his sleep, she learned his language from his dreams. She learned the words for *No*, and *Stop*. She heard him speak in tones she never heard him use by day, dry and acerbic, like powdered lime without any honey.

His lover was a swordsman, with nothing to fight now but the wind.
His lover could see nothing in the dark, and not much more by day.
Had he seen where the rocks ended and the night sky began?
Had the wind caught him, challenged him, and won?

She did not mean to spy on him. It was a hot day. She had been weeding; he'd been washing clothes. He'd hung them out all over the big bushes of rosemary and thyme to dry sweetly in the sun, and he'd gone inside her thick-walled house to rest, she thought. After a while, she went herself, to get out of the heat.

She opened the door, and stopped.

Her love was sitting at her long table, the case of knives open before him.

She watched him pick up each knife in turn, hold it up to the light, and touch himself lightly with it, as if deciding which one should know him more deeply.

She watched him place the tip of one to his arm, and gently press, and watch the blood run down.

"Campione," she said from the doorway.

He spoke some words she didn't understand. He cut himself in yet another place.

"Bad?" she asked.

He answered her again in that other tongue. But at least he laid the knife aside as the words came pouring out of him, thick and fast and liquid.

"I understand," she said; "I understand."

"You don't." He looked at her. "You cannot."

"You're hurt," she said. He shrugged, and ran his thumb over the shallow cuts he'd made, as if to erase them. "No, hurt inside. You see what is not bearable to see. I know."

"I see it in my mind," he muttered. "So clear—so clear—clear and bad, I see."

She came behind him, now, and touched his arms. "Is there no medicine for your grief?"

He folded his face between her breasts, hearing her living heartbeat.

"Can I cure you, Campione?"

And he said, "No."

"Can I try?" she asked.

And he said, "Try."

They brought his lover up from the sea, from the rocks under their window. He hadn't heard him fall, would never know if he had cried out in surprise, or silently let himself slip from the rocks and into the sea that surrounded them.

The man with the knives married her on midsummer's day. There were bonfires, and feasting and dancing. He got pretty drunk, and danced with everyone. Everyone seemed happy in her happiness. They jumped over the dying fire, and into their new life together.

And, carefully, he placed the feel of her warm, living flesh over the dread of what he had left, buried, for the earth to touch, on the other side of the island; what he'd left, buried, for the earth to take of what he once had; for the earth to take away the beauty that had been taken away from him by a foot that had

slipped, sure as it was always sure, out into the space that would divide them forever.

The Death of the Duke

ELLEN KUSHNER

THE DUKE WAS AN OLD MAN, and his young wife had never known him when his hair grew dark and heavy, and lay across the breasts of his many lovers like a mantle.

She was a foreigner, and so she did not understand, when he'd come home to his city to die, and the nursing of him through his final illness began to tax her strength, why his relations were so concerned to help her in the choosing of a manservant to attend him.

"Let him be pretty," said gentle Anne with a blush.

"But not *too* pretty." Sharp Katherine flashed her a look.

"By all means," the young wife said, "why not let him be as pretty as may be, if it will please my husband, so long as he is strong and careful?"

And since neither one would answer her, nor even look at her nor at each other, she chose a lovely young man whose name was Anselm. She did not know how badly he had wanted the job.

ANSELM HAD A STEADY HAND AND CLEAR EYES. He could fold linen and pour medicine, slip a shirt on and off with a minimum of fuss, and wield a razor quickly and efficiently. The Duke insisted on being presentable at all times, although he was no longer able to go anywhere. In his youth, the Duke's cuffs had foamed with lace, breaking like waves over the backs of his hands. His hands had been thin then, but they were thinner now.

Now the old Duke lay in the bed he had not lain in for twenty years, in the house he had built, furnished and decorated, and then abandoned. In a time when today's young lovers were not yet born, the Duke had left his city and his rights and his duties to follow his lover, the first and oldest and

best, to a far island where they might live at last for love, although the word was never spoken.

Sitting by him on the bed, his young wife said to the Duke, "There was an old woman outside, waiting for me in the doorway of your house. She took me by the wrist; quite strong, her fingers. 'Is he in there?' she asked me. 'Is he? They say he's come back home. They say that he is in there dying.'"

The Duke's smile had always been thin as a whip. "I hope you told her they were right."

His wife pressed his hand. She loved him helplessly and entirely. She was to be the last of his loves. Knowing it comforted her only a little; sometimes, not at all.

"Go and dress," he told her. "It will take you longer than you think to dress for the sort of party you are going to tonight."

She hated to leave him. "My maid can lace me up in no time."

"There's still your hair, and the jewels and the shoes…You'll be surprised."

"I want to stay with you." She snuggled into the bony hollow of his shoulder. "Suppose you're hungry, or the pain starts up again?"

"Anselm will bring me what I need." The Duke twined his fingers in her hair, stroking her scalp. "Besides, I want to see if they fitted it properly."

"I don't care. I'm sure it's a beautiful gown; you chose it."

The stroking stilled. "You *must* care. They must learn to know you, and to respect you."

She said, "At home, no one could respect a wife who left her husband to go to a party when he was—when he was ill."

"Well, things are different here. I told you they would be."

It was true. But she would come with him. Five years ago, she had married a stranger, a man wandering her island half-crazed with the loss of his lover, the oldest and the best. In her village, she was past the age of being wed. But it was only that she had been waiting for him: a man who saw her when he looked at her. He surprised her with her own desires, and how they could be satisfied.

That he had once been a duke in a foreign country was a surprise he'd saved for the end. The rings on his hands, which he'd never removed, not even in his grief, he wanted to return to his family himself. She had begged

to come with him on this final journey, although they both knew that it would end with him leaving her there alone. She wanted to see his people, to visit the places he had known; to hear him remember them there. She wanted his child to be born in the house of his fathers.

THE LAST JEWEL WAS SET IN PLACE on his wife's gown, the last curl pinned, the last flower arranged to suit the Duke's discerning eye. Exotic and stylish, livid and bright, the Duke's foreign wife went off in the carriage in a clatter of hooves and outriders, a blazon of flambeaux.

Candles were lit by the Duke's bed. Anselm sat quietly in a shadowed corner of the room.

"My wife," the Duke said, his eyes shut, white face against white pillow, "was the daughter of a great physician. He taught her all he knew, passed on to her his philtres and potions. She was justly proud, and healed a king with them. She loved a boy, a nobleman, but he was haughty, and did not return her love, nor could she make him. There are no philtres for that, whatever anyone may tell you." His own laugh made him catch his breath in pain. "Nor for this. It vexes her. And me."

Anselm said, "I wish it could be otherwise."

The Duke said dryly, "You're very kind. So do I. I suppose, being old, I should be graceful about it, and pretend not to mind much. But I have never lived to gratify others."

"No," said the lovely servant, whose loveliness went unnoticed. The Duke's eyelids were thin, almost blue, stretched over his eyes. His mouth was stiff with pain. "You caused some trouble in your time."

The taut face softened for a moment. "I did."

Anselm approached him with a drink poured into a silver cup. The cup was engraved with the Duke's family crest, a swan. There was no telling how old it was.

The Duke was tall, long-boned. There was not much flesh left on him and his skin was dry and parchment-thin, Anselm held him while he took the drink. It was like holding the mirror of a shadow: light instead of dark, edged instead of flat.

"Thank you," said the Duke. "That ought to help, for a while. I will sleep, I think. When she comes home, I want to hear what happened at the party. Something is bound to have, her first time out."

"You want to cause some trouble now, do you?" his servant gently teased.

The thin lips smiled. "Maybe." Then, "No. Not now. What would be the use?"

"What was the use then?"

"I wanted…to be amused."

Closer now, the planes of his own face gilded by candlelight, Anselm said, "Men died for you."

"Not for me. For him."

"He killed them for you."

"Yesss…" a long breath of satisfaction.

Anselm leaned closer. "And you remember. I know you do. You were there. You saw it all. How they were good, but he was the best." His strong hand was dark against the linen sheet. "There is no swordsman like him now."

"But there never was." The Duke's voice was stretched so thin that Anselm, bending close, must hold his breath to hear. "There never was anyone like him."

"And will not be again, I think." Anselm said as softly, and as much to himself.

"Never."

The Duke lay back, his color gone, and the pillow engulfed him, welcoming him back to his new world, the world of brief strengths and long weaknesses.

STILL GLITTERING WITH FINERY, and the kiss of wine and rich company, the Duke's wife returned to him, to find out whether he slept, or whether he waited for her in the darkness.

From the huge bed his thin, dry voice said, "You smell of revelry."

She struck a light, revealing herself in splendor. The flowers were only a little withered at her breast. Despite the scratch of lace and the weight of gold, she settled herself beside him on the bed. "Ah! That's good, now I no longer need to be held up." She sighed as he slowly unlaced her stays. "I pretended—" She stopped, then went on, shyly, determined not to be afraid of him, "I told myself they are your hands, keeping my back straight before them all."

He chuckled. “And were people so hard on you?”

“They *stare* so! It is not polite. And they say things I do not understand. About each other, about you…”

“What about me?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand it. Empty, pointless things that are supposed to mean more than they say. How you must find the city changed, and old friends gone.”

“All true. I hope you were not too bored.”

She pinched his shoulder. “Now you sound like them! No, I was not bored. I even got a compliment. An old man with diamonds and bad teeth said I was a great improvement on your first wife. He had very poor color—liver, I should think,” she added hurriedly, having spoken of something she had intended not to.

“Yes,” her husband said, impervious. “They can forgive me a foreigner better than they can an actress. Or maybe I finally merit pity, not censure, because I am sicker than any of them would like to be. Maybe that’s all it is.” His ruminations gave way to a story, more disjointed than he intended, a tale of past insult, of revenge. A lover spurned, the Duke’s first wife publicly hissed; a young man’s anger and the answer of money and steel. Blood and no healing, only scars closing over a dirty wound.

These were not stories that she had heard before, on the sunny island where they had been wed among the bees’ hum and the thyme. They did not even describe a man she knew.

Lying undressed in the dark, next to his thin and burning body, she wondered for the first time if they had been right to come here to this place of his past.

His hand moved, half-aware, to her shoulder blade, cupping it like a breast. Her whole body flushed with memory. She desired him suddenly, wanted her strong lover back. But she knew the disease, she knew its course, and clenched her heart around the knowledge that that would not happen. All that had passed between their bodies was done, now, and was growing in her belly. In the future it would comfort her, but not now.

“People do not forget,” he said. She’d thought he was asleep, his breathing was so quiet.

“You,” she said tenderly. “They do not forget you.”

"Not me. Themselves. I was important only for what I made them feel. Remember that." His fingers tightened on her, urgent and unalluring. "And do not trust anyone from my past. They have no cause to love me."

"I love you."

A little later, he sighed in his sleep, and spoke the name of his first wife, while he held her. She felt her heart twist and turn over, close to the child she carried, so that there was room for little inside her but pain and love.

PHYSICIANS HOPING TO MAKE THEIR FAME and fortunes came to bleed him.

"There isn't enough left of me as is," said the Duke. He sent his wife down to chase them all away, knowing it would give her satisfaction to have someone else to be angry with.

Anselm was shaving him, gently and carefully. "In the old days," Anselm said, "you would have had them skewered."

The Duke did not even smile. "No. He did not kill unarmed men. There was no challenge in it."

"How did you find challenges for him? Did you have a good eye?"

Now the old lips quirked. "You know—I must have. I never thought of it. But there was a certain kind of bully I delighted in provoking: the swaggering cocksure idiot who pushed everyone out of the way, and beat up on the girl who worked to keep him in funds. That sort generally carried a sword."

"And would you know now?" Anselm busied himself with cleaning the brushes. "Would you know a decent swordsman if you saw one—by the swagger, say, or by the stance?"

"Only," said the Duke, "if he was being particularly annoying. May I see that?"

When Anselm offered the brush for inspection, close, so the weak eyes could focus on it, the Duke closed his fingers around the young man's wrist. His touch was paper-dry. Anselm kept his arm steady, although his eyelids trembled, a fringe of dark lashes surrounding blue eyes so dark as to be almost violet.

"You have a good wrist," the Duke observed. "When do you practice?"

"In my room." Anselm swallowed. His skin was burning where the bony fingers barely touched it.

"Have you killed anyone?"

"No—not yet."

"They don't kill much, nowadays, I hear. Demonstration bouts, a little blood on the sleeve."

The Duke's wife came in at the door without knocking, full of her achievement. But the Duke held his servant's wrist for one moment more, and looked at his face, and saw that he was beautiful.

VISITORS SOMETIMES WERE ALLOWED, although not the ones who promised a miracle cure. The pain came and went; the Duke took to asking his wife two and three times a day whether there was enough poppy juice in the house laid by. The medicine made his mind wander, so that he talked with ghosts, and she learned more of his past than sometimes she wanted to hear. When visitors came, people who were still alive, she often sat quietly in a corner of the room, willing herself invisible, to learn more. Other old men, more robust than her husband, she still found not half as beautiful. She wondered how he ever could have touched them, and tried to imagine them young and blooming.

Lord Sansome came to gloat, her husband said, or maybe to apologize; either way, it would be amusing to see what time had done with him. She thought admitting such a man unwise, but he made a nice change from the ghosts.

Sansome had bad teeth and a poor color, but he took the glass of wine that Anselm offered. The nobleman approved the young servant up and down. He settled by the bed with his gold-headed stick upright between his knees.

The Duke watched his visitor through half-lidded eyes; he was tired, but wanted no drugs until he'd gone.

Sansome uttered no commonplaces, nor was he offered any. And so there was silence until the Duke said, "Whatever you are thinking is probably true. Thank you for coming. It is prodigious kind."

His foreign wife didn't know what *prodigious* meant. It sounded like an insult; she readied herself for action. But Lord Sansome continued to sit.

The Duke closed his eyes but kept on talking: "I do not think that I am going to die while you sit there. Though I know it would please you greatly."

Across the room, Anselm made a noise that in a less well-bred servant would have been a snort. He busied himself with the brushes, so that all

they could hear was their *hush-hush-hush* as he cleaned.

At last, Sansome spoke. "I thought you gone years ago. No one knew where you were. I thought you'd died of a broken heart."

"It mended."

"You told me you didn't have one."

"Wishful thinking. I see that yours beats on."

"Oh, yes." Sansome's thick-veined hands opened and closed on the gold ball of his stick. "Mine does. Though we never know what's around the corner, do we?"

"I believe I do."

"Perhaps something may yet surprise you." Unexpectedly, Lord Sansome smiled warmly at the Duke's manservant. Anselm looked annoyed.

"He's good with a blade," Sansome observed.

"You've had the pleasure?"

"Once or twice. A nice, close shave."

"Oh." The old Duke laughed, and kept on laughing at a joke no one else could see, until his breath drew in pain, and wife and servant shut him off from view while they held and gave him drink to ease him.

When Lord Sansome was gone, "People do not forget," the Duke said dreamily. "I think this pleases me. Or why would I have come back?"

"MY REFERENCES CAME FROM SOMEWHERE." Anselm was curt with the Duke, who had been goading him with revelations. They were alone together. "I never would have gotten in to you without them. Your family checked; and I do know how to valet. Now tell me again. Tell me about how he held his hands."

"They were never empty. He was always doing something: gripping bars to strengthen his wrists, squeezing balls, tossing a knife…and other things." The Duke smiled most annoyingly to himself. Anselm was coming to know that smile, and knew that there was no coaxing out of the Duke whatever memories it hid.

The old man's face clouded, and he began to swear, inelegantly, with pain. Anselm wiped his sweating face with a cold cloth, and kept on this way until the Duke could speak again: "As an adventure, this is beginning to pall. Life grows dull when all I have to wonder about is how long my shirt will stay dry, and whether I am going to swallow soup or vomit it up. I would

say, Let's have it over and done with, but my wife will not like that. Of course," he bared his teeth in a painful grin, "she doesn't like me in this condition, either. There really is no pleasing some people."

"You must take comfort in the child that is to come."

"Not really. That was only to please my wife. I do not want posterity. I was a great disappointment to my parents."

Anselm shrugged. "Aren't we all?"

"But when I am dead, it will keep her from doing something stupid. That is important."

Anselm was good at catching hints. "Shall I fetch your lady?"

"No." The Duke's hand was cold on his. "Let us talk."

"I'm not like you," Anselm said hopelessly. "Words are not my tools. All I can do is ask questions. You are the one who knows things, sir, not I. What I want to know, even you cannot show me."

"Annoying for you," the sick man said; "since sometimes I do see him, yet—in the corners of the room. But it's only the drugs, since he never answers when I speak."

"He was the greatest swordsman who ever lived. If taking drugs would let me see him, I'd do it." Anselm paced the room, his measured valet's demeanor given way to an athlete's ardent stride. "I wonder, sometimes, if there is any point even in trying. He took his secrets with him. If only I could have watched how he did what he did!" The sick man made no reply. "You were there. You saw. What did you see? Can't you tell me? What did you see?"

The Duke slowly smiled, his vision turned inward. "It was beautiful; not like this. He killed them quickly, with one blow, straight to the heart."

"How?" Anselm demanded, fists clenched. "No one offers his heart to the sword."

With every one of his fighter's senses, he felt the Duke's regard full upon him, unclouded by dream or pain. It drew him back to the bed, as though to close with an opponent, or a partner.

"No one?" the Duke whispered. Anselm knelt to hear him. "Not no one, boy."

The Duke's hand drifted down into his dark and springy hair.

Anselm said, "You are a terrible man." He seized the fingers, tangled in his hair with his own, and pulled them through his curls down to his

mouth.

LYING BY HIM IN THE DARK, the Duke's wife said, "I have seen so many women through childbirth, I should be more afraid. But I am not. I know this will be a good child. I hope that you will see him."

His hand was on her gently rounded belly. "I hope he will not be too unhappy."

"As you were?" she answered sadly. "No, my darling. This one will know that he is loved, I promise you!" She gripped his fragile hand; fading, like the rest of him, even in the dark. "And he will know all about his father, that I promise, too."

"No," the man said; "not if it makes him unhappy."

"He will be happy."

"You promise that, do you?" She heard his smile. "Will you take him back to the island, then, to run with the goats?"

"Certainly not!" Sometimes the things he assumed amazed her. "He will stay here, with his family. He must be raised in your city, among people who know you."

"I think he would be more happy on the island." The Duke sighed. "I wish I could go back there, after, and rest on a hill above the sea. But I suppose it is impossible."

In a small voice she said, "I suppose it is. Where will you go, then?"

"I shall lie in the Stone City: ranks and ranks of tombs like houses, with all my ancestors, my family—that should please your sense of decorum. They are not the company I would have chosen, but I suppose I will not care then."

"I will bring him there. To visit you."

He pulled his hand away. "By no means. I forbid it."

"But I want him to know you."

"If you insist on telling the child stories about me, do it somewhere nice, with a fire, and bread and milk…" She had given him poppy syrup; soon he would sleep. "I hope he will be beautiful. Not like me. Beautiful as you are. As *he* was."

Some of the time, he spoke of people she did not know. But she knew this one well, this loved ghost from his past, the beautiful, the rare, first

love and best. She willed her breath to evenness, her arms to softness. A memory, nothing, against a living child.

"I wanted him to kill me. Years ago. But he never got round to it."

"Hush, love, hush."

"No, but he promised! And so I hold him to it. In the end he failed me, he left me. But he will come for me. Long ago he promised to come for me. He is my death."

She held him tightly to her, hoping he was too far gone to notice her sobbing breath, and the tears that fell on both their skins.

LORD SANSOME DID NOT COME AGAIN, though he sent the Duke's bodyservant, Anselm, a gift of money.

"What will you spend it on?" the Duke inquired; "swords or sweethearts?"

His servant frowned. "I feel I should return it. It isn't right for me to take what I do not intend to earn."

"Oh, re-eally?" Weariness drew out the old man's drawl. "But surely my old friend can be nothing but pleased that you care for me so thoroughly? It is his right to tip you if he wishes."

Anselm drew back. "Do you want to be shaved or don't you?"

"Is anyone expected?"

"No one but Her Ladyship, and that not until noon."

"She will not mind. The way I look, I mean. Put that thing down, Anselm. It is the wrong blade for you. Lord Sansome doesn't know it, but I do. I do."

THE HOURS WHEN HE KNEW HER GREW FARTHER APART. At last, she was uncovering every thing that he had kept from her—promises to his first wife, quarrels with his lovers, games with his sister—she heard a young man's voice, disputing with a tutor, and murmuring provocation so sweet it could only be to his old lover, the first and best. Did she give him more poppy than she should, to keep the voices coming, and to shield him from the pain? She tried, but in the end she had to fail, as even love could not appease the author of the play that he was in. He did not eat, he barely spoke. The old tart who had known him young came back to the door. His

lady would not let her in to see him now, but, seeking her own comfort, went down to sit a moment with this relic of his past.

In the shadowed room, the Duke's patient servant waited.

The old Duke opened his eyes wide and looked at him.

"Oh," he said. "I didn't think it would be now."

"When else?" said the swordsman. "I promised, didn't I?"

"You did. I thought you had forgotten."

"No. Not this."

"I always wanted you to."

"Of course you did. But that wasn't the time."

"How bright it is! Do it quickly. I'm afraid of pain."

The other end of the bright blade laughed. "You can't breathe properly. You can't even feel your feet. This will be quick. Open your arms, now."

"Oh," said the old Duke again; "I knew you'd come."

Honored Guest

ELLEN KUSHNER

I HAVE MET VERY FEW EVIL PEOPLE IN MY LIFE, but my grandmother is one of them. When my mother died, Omama told my father that she would support him and my brother and me, but only if he gave up all his and my mother's friends, her family, and his work in their studio, to return to Omama's family compound.

There was no reason for this. She already had other sons and cousins working for her. There had been one more, but my uncle Great Light had taken his own life right before the Harvest Festival. Maybe she needed father back to make up a propitious number. That's not what he says. When I asked why we could not visit my weaver grandmother and all the cousins anymore, he sighed. "Omama has never learned to share."

"She's so rich she never had to."

"Wealth is not a disease, Bright Phoenix," my father said sternly. "You may be rich yourself someday, so I want you to remember that."

That may be so, but I think being rich can make you selfish. It's like a cold: you have to fight it off by wrapping up warm and keeping your head covered. I don't care so much about being rich, but I might like to be famous. I think I have a pretty good shot at it, because since I was five I have played the *kchin*, and even my brother Great Joy, who is good at games and doesn't like to lose, knows that I play better than he does. I like to practice. When I kneel before my instrument, and my fingers bend and dance on the strings, I feel as if I know things no one has ever known before. It isn't just pretty sounds, it's like entering another world. Some of the great *kchin* players played for years in solitude before letting anyone else hear them, but I don't mind playing for others. I like their admiration well

enough, but even better I like to think that somehow my music has changed them, as it changes me.

It isn't really decent for a well-bred girl to be famous, I know. Even my weaver grandmother used to *tut!* and bite off threads with a snap when the subject came up. "A decent girl doesn't get herself talked about," she'd say. So maybe I won't be famous in my own lifetime. It's different after you're dead; it's all right for people to talk about you then. In the *Annals of the Ancestors*, which we are reading with our tutor, it says very nice things about the poet Lady Glorious Spring, the painter Pure Delight, and the calligrapher Lady Sweet Water—not only were they all virtuous, but some are even relatives, and Lady Sweet Water was the prince's own concubine.

My Omama likes to hear us play. When she has guests, Great Joy and I are often summoned to the Phoenix Chamber to perform for them after a meal, while she and her guests sit on their cushions around the rosewood tables, drinking tea and munching sweets. Unless instructed otherwise, we play old favorites, nothing new or original: "The Bridge of Sighs," "Maiden's Fancy," things like that. Joy always wants us to do "Spring Sowing" because he gets to do the show-offy bit imitating the lark.

"Of course I had great talent when I was a girl," our grandmother says when we are done. Somehow she manages to make it sound as if she was much better than we are. "The great Yellow Tortoise himself invited me to play a duet with him when he attended my father's birthday feast. What an event that was! Everyone was there. Lady Sweet Water kissed my cheek, and the Crown Prince himself honored me with a bow. Oh, yes, I was quite something. Though you wouldn't know it to look at me now." She holds out her huge, knobby hands, crusty with rings, and of course all the guests say that, No, her hands are wonderful, lovely, she must honor them with a tune…

All except one. The red-haired woman in the fancy trousers, sitting at the end of the table, says quietly, "Wisdom comes with age. Pain comes with wisdom." Her foreign accent is musical. Even sitting, she is very tall. I have been watching her as she surreptitiously shifts her long legs under the table, trying to get comfortable.

My grandmother looks sharply at her. "What book taught you to say *that*, Honored Miss?"

"An old one," says the visitor. "As you know, I collect antiquities."

"Antiquities?" Uncle Green Tea asks. "Then perhaps you have come to admire our famous crystal tortoise?"

But Omama shushes him. "Pray continue, Honored Guest."

"Today we like to view the world as an endless progress toward a perfect now. And so we scorn those who came before us as unenlightened fools. But I know this of the riches I traffic in: their age often reveals great wisdom."

"Maybe your barbarian kindred scorn the past," says Omama rudely. "In this house, we respect the ancestors."

"And pain?" A young poet my grandmother likes to flirt with leans forward, challenging the stranger. "Does the wisdom of your antique writings also reveal pain and its cure?"

The red-haired woman takes a long sip of tea before she answers. "True wisdom conquers pain." She keeps her eyes lowered, as if her spiky eyelashes are shielding some secret. But I have noticed already that they are vivid green, the color of cress in the stream, of moss in the wood—all colors found in nature, but I have never seen them looking out from a human face. And her hair is a fox's hair, though much softer, and braided with jewels. Her nose is long and sharp, and her fingers are tapered, a musician's hands. Strange that she collects antiquities. I wonder what she is doing here? Perhaps she is selling us something. Omama likes to have the best and the rarest of everything.

The foreign woman turns her strange eyes to Omama's poet. "Since pain is not a disease," she says, "there is no one cure for the suffering it causes. Each pain demands its own cure."

My uncle Green Tea smiles politely. "As the pain of tooth-ache is helped by willow bark and syrup of poppy?"

("Idiot," Omama snarls.)

"Exactly, Honored Sir," the stranger says smoothly. "But you would never take that for the pain of childbirth."

"And the pain of love?" asks the poet daringly.

"Why," she says, contriving to look up at him through her lashes, even though she is taller than he, "the lover saying *yes*, that is the cure to that pain."

Even though she speaks our language slowly and thoughtfully, her voice is pure music. The poet flushes a little. Omama's clawed ringed hand

descends on his wrist. “More tea?” She speaks with great refinement, but the words croak in her throat. If her voice was ever beautiful, it isn’t now.

But the stranger has the poet in thrall. He leans toward her, past Omama’s hand, so far that he is in danger of knocking over the table. “And the road to that *yes*?” he breathes. “Where do we find that?”

She smiles demurely—“Where but in music?”—and slides her eyes over to me, seated silent at my *kchin*. “Even more than words, poetical sir, music unlocks the heart, does it not?”

“Ah!” gasps the poet, because my grandmother’s claws have dug into his wrist for real this time. Great Joy is about to giggle; I kick him under the low table our *kchins* rest on. Unbidden, he starts to play, and I join him, to make it look planned. All right, it’s “Spring Sowing” again, but it’s a sprightly tune, bound to cheer up even the most disgruntled of guests…and even, I hope, their more disgruntled hostess.

But it’s a disaster. Even though we take the piece too fast, and almost crash into the ending, the poet is full of praise for our playing. He compliments my grace and charm particularly. He doesn’t know he’s digging himself a hole so deep he’ll never be invited back again. Omama doesn’t like to hear anything praised but herself, and sometimes her collections, because she chose them.

Although she is a newcomer, the strange guest is wise enough to know this. “Oh, bah!” she says dismissively. “Any girl may look charming and graceful posed over such a rare and gorgeous instrument as that—and dressed as she is, too, in such lovely robes. Cloth like that would lend beauty to a block of wood. I tell you, I have traveled the length and breadth of these islands, and nowhere have I seen such weaving.”

The cloth of my robes was made by my weaver grandmother, but Omama doesn’t say so. “Of course you haven’t.” She gestures to the maid to offer the woman more sweets. “Our weavers are the finest and most subtle. Their work embodies the very spirit of the land. Patterns laid down by tradition, passed through the generations. I have only the best in my household, of course; I chose that stuff for Bright Phoenix’s robe. She has a muddy complexion, but the right colors can work wonders. Stand up, child, and turn around.”

I feel so hot that I can barely breathe. I don’t know if it’s anger or embarrassment or what. Maybe I’m getting sick. I force myself to rise to my

feet slowly. I am standing in the center of the tables, on the mat above them all.

"Look at the child!" Omama cackles. "Clumsy as an ox. You'd never know she was of my family, would you? Of course, in my day, we learned deportment. People always remarked on the grace of my walk. Seeing me in the garden, the poet Violent Cloud said, was like seeing a peony drift down the path, cut loose from its stem…"

"May I?" murmurs the foreign woman. She reaches out to finger the cloth of my robe. When she touches it, I feel something vibrate deep in me, as if she has just plucked a string. "They say there is magic woven into your fabrics, as well, magic that must be given freely."

Omama chuckles. "As to that…I don't know anything about that. But it will take a deal of magic to turn this ox into a swan, clumsy thing! That's enough, girl, sit down. Are you interested in cloth, Honored Guest? I have an unparalleled collection of weavings. What Phoenix wears is mere trash next to them."

"Weaving?" the foreigner says vaguely. She fiddles with the ruby in her ear. "Oh, no. Carvings and manuscripts are more my line; I have clients all over the islands of the most discriminating tastes; what would they want with cloth?"

"Barbarians," Omama mutters under her breath, so everyone can hear her.

She waves at my brother and me, as if she were shooing chickens out of the yard. We bow and then wrap up our instruments in their layers of special cloth and carry them out with us.

As we walk out, I hear the foreigner say, "Any crystal that you have chosen, Honored Lady, must naturally be of the best."

I am grateful to the moss-eyed woman for soothing Omama's ruffled feathers; but for some reason, I am sad that she did not think me worthy of praise.

THE NEXT MORNING, OMAMA SENDS FOR ME.

She is sitting on her couch, surrounded by beautiful objects—precious carvings of wood and stone, fine glazed vases, and even enameled urns, as well as rich hangings—while her maids put the finishing touches on her

makeup and her hair. She looks as though she herself is being turned into an object of art.

"Girl." She does not ask me to sit, and so I stand. "I have decided. You spend too much time alone, or with your brother. You will spend mornings with me, from now on. You will read aloud to me, and refine your embroidery skills, which are lamentable. You will lunch with me unless I have guests, and in the afternoon, after my nap, you will observe the way that I do business. It is time you learn something of how the family makes its money; you know nothing of trade, or money lending, or influence, for that matter. You do not know the world. It is time you began."

My head is spinning, and my mouth hangs open, but nothing comes out, which is good, because I hear nothing in her plans for me that allows for time to study, or to practice, unless she is asleep. And as for business—

"Close your mouth, girl, you look like a stuffed trout. And say, *Thank you, Omama.* It's not every girl gets a chance like this."

"Thank you, Omama," I parrot while my heart pounds in panic. "What about Father? Surely he can teach me about business."

"Ah…" She looks into a mirror, frowns, and shakes her head at the maid who is holding it. "Not the wisteria hairpiece, you idiot girl!" The maid flushes, but Omama doesn't notice; it's as if no one has any feelings in the world but her. "Your father is very busy these days. Now that he is in a responsible position, he cannot possibly waste his time on you."

"But Father has always taught me!"

I have gone too far. You do not argue with Omama. "Taught you what?" she blazes. "Taught you disrespect? Taught you to waste your time? Or to spend it on useless frivolity, on wastrels and vulgar craftsmen like your mother's trashy family?" She spits and hisses like fire. "Look at you—ugly as sin and day-old mold, standing there gaping like a beached fish. Look at her!" she instructs all the maids. "Children are supposed to be a blessing, but mine only bring forth curses like this one! Born in the garbage, what can you expect—a merchant's daughter wasn't good enough for him, he had to go against my wishes and marry down in the gutter, and what do they bring forth but gutter trash?"

"You're wasting your time," says a musical voice from the doorway.

It is the tall woman, the stranger who collects antiques. How did she get here without being sent for? "Forgive me—I'm early, aren't I? But I so

wanted to see the crystal tortoise. And instead I stumble on you being vexed by ungrateful relatives."

Omama laughs bitterly. "Wasting my time, am I?"

"Afraid yes." The woman slips into the room like a whispered tune. Today she is wearing our style of dress: a robe of gray, cross-woven with green threads that shimmer when she moves, bound up with a sash in a seashell pattern. Her wild hair is modestly coiffed, stuck through with two sticks topped with shells as well. It's as though she is a cool breeze come in; for the first time, I feel like I can breathe again. Even though she proceeds to insult me: "Children are born to be a heart-break to their parents. I certainly was. You can no more *affect* them with your own wisdom than you can *infect* a stone with a head cold."

Omama laughs, and the whole room breathes again. "You're right about that. A stone is exactly what this one's got for brains."

The woman shrugs. "What do you expect? Girls are a curse—when they're young." She makes it sound as if she's old herself, as old as Omama, although she is nowhere near. "Fortunately, Miss Bright Phoenix is most ornamental, which makes up for a lot."

Oh, dear. First she says I'm a curse, and now she's praising me. I feel myself prickle with pleasure, even as I dread what's coming. I want to tell her, *Stop! You'll set her off again!* My hands are shaking a little, still, from the last tirade. When Omama starts spitting poison at me, there is nothing I can do but wait till she is done. I have learned not to cry, no matter what she says. But it can be so hard.

"The women of our family have always been beauties," Omama says smugly. She presses her crimsoned lips together as if she's just eaten a tasty sweet. "It's a pity about her feet." Omama thinks only peasants have big feet. My feet are not that large. I am glad to see that today I am wearing my prettiest slippers, embroidered with peonies. "Sit down, girl, so we don't all have to look at them." I sit on the cushions across from her. "So, Honored Guest, you are eager to see my tortoise, are you? Amaranth," she tells a maid, "fetch out the crystal tortoise—and be sure you don't drop it with your donkey's hands."

Another maid kneels and pours out the tea into translucent porcelain cups. The guest is about to drink when my grandmother smacks it out of her hand and it spills all over the silk pillows. "Clumsy idiot!" Omama barks

at the poor maid. "What do you think you are doing? How can you serve jasmine tea before noon?"

I try to catch the maid's eye, to offer her a sympathetic glance, but she won't meet my look.

"Honestly," Omama says, "they get stupider every year. I don't know why they can't keep it straight, something as simple as that."

Our guest doesn't bat an eye; she just mops up the tea with her handkerchief. "The Sultan of Uru served jasmine tea for *breakfast*," she says. "Shows you what he's made of, eh?" With her other hand she turns the ruby in her ear.

Is she laughing at us? Omama doesn't think so. She nods approval. "I hear the only taste he's got is in ivories. I don't suppose you picked up any of those in Uru…?"

"One or two," the merchant says nonchalantly. "Nothing up to your standards, I expect, but I could show them to you if you like."

I feel like a ball being batted between two tigers. What will the strange woman do next? Does she like me, or not? And why should I care? Surely she is just trying to get on Omama's good side. She is a merchant, after all, and Omama is rich. Maybe she has something to sell her. Maybe she is hoping to buy the crystal tortoise and thinks she'll get a bargain if she flatters my grandmother. I wonder if Omama has noticed the ruby that glitters in the guest's right ear. It isn't very large, but the color is very true. Maybe that's why the strange woman puts her hand to it so often, to hide it lest Omama be jealous.

Amaranth presents the crystal tortoise on its silken cushion.

The guest looks at it with hungry eyes. "May I?" She picks it up and examines it in the light. "Remarkable. Flawless, as you say. One of the treasures of the house."

"A real artist made this." Omama's lacquered claws reach for the tortoise, and tap its crystal shell. "Notice the curve, an almost perfect sphere…"

"Mm, yes. Old, too, I'd say."

"Plenty old, Honored Guest. Does it please you?"

"How could it not? If I may—" She takes it back, and strokes the crystal with her tapered finger. Her nails are short as a boy's. "They say the tortoise lives a thousand years, and grows wiser with each one. To own such a

thing…surely the owner is happy and will also live well beyond his allotted span. How lucky you are to possess it!"

"Hardly lucky." Omama sighs gustily. "It is beautiful, yes, but the thing is a curse to me." The merchant sits forward and looks interested. I wonder, is this the business I am supposed to be learning, this bargaining over the tortoise? "Yes, a curse. My husband gave it to me before he died—just before."

"How sad. That such a lovely thing should be twined with such grief!"

Omama strikes a noble attitude. "Sad, indeed. Grief and I are old friends." I could just smack her.

"Such a brave woman," the visitor says. "To live with such memories!"

Omama has the tortoise on her lap and is stroking it like a kitten. "Sometimes I think I should just get rid of it. As you say, it would fetch a pretty price. It is, I'm sure, worth ten times what I paid for it. But then I think, no, I must keep it in the family."

"To pass on to your lovely granddaughter, perhaps?"

Omama chuckles. "Perhaps. If she pleases me."

"At least you have taken great pains to train her to be a decent musician."

"Would you like Miss Phoenix to play for you again?" She claps her hands to the maids. "Buttercup! Fetch Miss Phoenix's instrument."

No one moves. "Buttercup, I said!"

The youngest maid flutters a bow. "You sent Buttercup away last year. I'm Goldenrod, madam."

"I know who you are! There's nothing wrong with my memory."

Goldenrod brings the *kchin*. The maid wants to unwrap it for me, but I never let anyone else do that. It is wrapped in cloth my weaver grandmother gave me when I left her house, when my mother died. Ancient cloth, the forerunner of the pattern my grandmother and her sisters are famous for. The weaving is subtle, with hints of clouds and cranes and mountaintops. "Your future is not in crafting such as this," my mother's mother told me, "but it will protect your chosen instrument." It still has the smell of the house I grew up in, buried deep in its folds.

I play "Maiden's Fancy" with all the variations. If I can go far enough into the music, I can forget about what's going on, the two tigers battling with me in the middle, sure as always to get hurt. If the stranger is cruel, I'll

suffer. And if she is kind, Omama will punish me for it. Don't think about it. Think about the music.

Knowing the piece by heart, I sneak a look up through my lashes as I play. Omama is frowning into her teacup. The visitor is sprawled back on her cushions, her body loose with pleasure. Her red head is tilted back, her long neck stretched out like a melody. She is listening, though; there is a furrow of concentration between her brows. When I finish, she doesn't move. "Ah," she sighs. "That was worth traveling for."

For the first time, she addresses me directly. "Now how did a young girl learn to play like that?"

"It's nothing."

"It's everything. Art like that is everything. All I can do is appreciate; you create. What's that song called?"

"'Maiden's Fancy.'"

"Well that explains it. A young girl's hopes and dreams and wishes, ice and fire, power and helplessness…that is what is meant by *fancy*, yes?"

"Yes," I breathe.

"And you know it all in your own heart. And make me feel it, remember it, in mine. That is what art does. It makes us remember, yes?"

Omama laughs a brittle laugh. "I don't need music to remember. My memory is flawless."

"Oh, come, now, madam; all of us forget from time to time. And as the years pile on each other, with so many memories to keep track of, it is easy to misplace one or two, no?"

"Flawless," Omama rasps again. "Do you not know the story of the Immortal Tortoise of the Blessed Isles? To capture one is to ensure a hundred years of vigorous youth." And, indeed, she has her fingers clasped around the tortoise like a jeweled cage.

"Truly," the guest says politely, "so fine is the carving that one might almost imagine this to be one of the Immortals turned to crystal. Do you not think so, Miss Phoenix?"

Before I can answer, Omama snorts, "Please! Bright Phoenix has no eye for art or beauty of any kind."

"How can a girl live surrounded by so much beauty here, and yet be insensitive to it?"

I'm not! I want to tell the stranger. *I know beauty; I live for it. Don't listen to her.*

"I have no idea. But there she is, fit only to moon about and noodle on the strings. She knows nothing of the world. I am trying to teach her to be practical, for all the good it does."

"Ah, no." The foreign woman shakes her shapely head. "This one will never be practical. She is not like us. A dreamer and a maker, that one. Decorative and diverting, yes, but no more."

My hand flies to my heart, as if to press it back in. The poet writes: *Hard words from a friend cut glass; they are glittering diamonds of pain*. But this woman is not my friend; why do her words cut me so?

"Now, the Tortoise of the Blessed Isles," she goes on. "There are many who scoff at such tales. People like us, practical people who know the world. They even scoff at the thought of your weaver women, putting power into their cloth. They say only the ignorant are wont to perceive artists as magic makers, miracle workers, beyond the run of ordinary folk. I was one such scoffer…once. I had heard of the Immortal Tortoise; who hasn't? I had heard…but now I have seen."

"Seen?" Omama's eyes are sharp and bright. "How, seen?"

"I have sailed the seas for many years. Some say its color has even got into my eyes. Such voyages are not without a price. Once, long ago, I encountered a storm so fierce that all my ship was lost. I battled through the waves to an island. And there, in the pearly dawn, thirsty and aching, I woke to such a sight…" She looks off into the distance, as though seeing it again, and turns the ruby in her ear. "Tortoises on the beach. Hundreds of them, it seemed. They move very slowly. You can stand and watch, and think that one is standing still, until you see its tracks in the sand and realize that it has moved, indeed."

"Is old age slowing them down?"

"Far from it. Wisdom, maybe. I watched them for a long, long time. They permitted me to survive, as if their wisdom was also a gift."

My grandmother nods thoughtfully. "The wise move slowly, is that it?"

The guest demurely lowers her eyelids. "Maybe more slowly even than old age."

Omama looks sharply at her face. "How old did you say you are?"

"I didn't."

"And where was this island of yours?"

"No one knows."

"You were rescued."

"I was rescued at sea. Despairing of being found there after so long, I built myself a raft, and cast myself upon the mercy of the waves. And for weeks, maybe months, I drifted, sustained only by…tortoise flesh."

"How much?"

"Ten, twenty…"

"No. How much do you want for it?"

I don't believe it. Omama is bargaining for magic tortoise flesh. She is too impatient even to observe the niceties. It's as if, seeing the cure for old age within her reach, my grandmother doesn't want to let even another minute go by without it.

The woman pulls a kerchief from her purse and unwraps it to show a piece of leather. "There is no price for such as this," she says. "But, Gracious Lady, I will give it to you, gladly, for the gift of the tune your sweet granddaughter played me. It is a privilege to watch her soft young face, and her art has given me back my youth more surely than any magic can."

I can hardly breathe. I don't even want to imagine what's coming next. But Omama only smiles a cutting smile. "I am so glad the music pleased you."

"Very much so."

"My dear," Omama says poisonously to me, "our Honored Guest has praised you well beyond your feeble merit. We must make an equally generous gift to thank her."

"Not at all," the woman says. But I can feel her quivering like a cat on the hunt, her gaze fixed on the crystal tortoise glowing on its silk cushion. Oh, the rogue! She doesn't care about me at all.

I kneel as gracefully as I can. I stretch out my hand for the crystal, but Omama's voice stops me like a whip. "No, my dear. For a gift to be of real value, it must come from the heart."

In that moment, we both understand clearly. The expression on the stranger's face is nearly comical, surprised and baffled. She is not very good at hiding her feelings after all. But I hide mine, although I cannot speak, for fear my voice will betray me. Omama knows my heart too well. I bow to the stranger, so low my hair brushes the pillow at her feet. *This is what comes of*

trying to be clever, I want to tell her. *This is what comes of trying to outplay Omama. You, beautiful stranger, with your grassy eyes and foxy hair, your sweet voice and razored words, you are no match for her. And neither am I.*

"Come, child," Omama says stickily, like honey. "You, who have been given so much, must learn to be generous."

I cannot stop my hands from shaking just a little as I lift the *kchin*. The woman receives it awkwardly, like someone being given a baby to hold who's afraid she'll drop it. "Such a fine instrument should be protected," she stammers awkwardly. She tries to wrap it in the end of her sash, which of course is ridiculous.

I find I have my grandmother's cloth twisted round my hands, the cranes and mountains chasing each other amongst the clouds. At a signal from Omama, I slowly unbind myself from it, and gently drape it around the *kchin*. Omama nods, and I bow and go, finding the way to the door by memory, since my eyes are blind with tears.

"I may not live a thousand years," I hear her tell the woman, "but I have enough wisdom to know a treasure's worth. More tea, Honored Guest? My goodness; tortoise tastes much like shoe leather."

I SIT IN MY ROOM, VERY STILL. I eat nothing and drink nothing. I am going to die here. Hour by hour and piece by piece, I am going to be forced to give up more and more of myself, until all that is left is a sad lady with rich robes and too many pairs of embroidered slippers to hide her big feet. If I'm lucky, I will be married off to some dignitary; if I'm not, I'll be kept at Omama's side until she dies—*Or until I kill her*, a small voice whispers inside me. But that is nonsense. When I dreamed of fame, it was not as a murderer. Those are not the books I long to be in, the lists of awful tragedies and wicked deeds. I wanted something else.

There are poems about the way I feel: tears staining silk, and loss like a hole that cannot be filled. But their very images imply a kind of loveliness. I don't feel lovely. I just feel dead, and tired, and very sad. The strange merchant is surely gone by now. She sent me no token of thanks, not even a note.

The moon enters my window like a thief, but unlike any thief it leaves a bar of silver in my lap.

And into the bar of silver falls a pebble, a rough little stone, and then another. I look up to the window and see a slender hand, with short nails like a boy's. "Hist!" she whispers. "Come out."

I follow the voice out into the moonlit garden.

"There you are," she says. Her face is white. The moon turns her hair the color of dried blood. "Cost me a fortune to find out which one's your window. Good! I wanted to thank you."

"Don't thank me."

"Wait until you see what form my thanks take." She steps closer to me, and I do not turn away. She cannot hurt me anymore; she has already taken what I love most. "You were generous."

"Against my will."

The stranger woman looks down at me, long and hard, so that I look up to meet her cress green eyes. "Your grandmother's a fool, you know. She can no more keep you from your art than that stupid tortoise can keep her from her death."

"You wanted that stupid tortoise!"

"Is that what you think? I wanted something else."

"What?"

"Kiss me and find out."

I raise my face to her. Her breath smells of sweet almonds. And when she kisses me, it's—nothing like music, it's like nothing but itself, as if there were a whole new part of my body I've never known about till now, and a whole new art form waiting for it to master.

"There," she murmurs. "I have taken the most valuable thing in her house, and she doesn't even know it. Sweet girl, I've got something for you." I am expecting a locket or a ring—but she turns away to the bench behind her and lifts up something large. The strings of my *kchin* shine in the moonlight. "Here you go."

I clutch it to me as if it were my heart.

"The cloth," I say. "It was wrapped in a cloth."

"Ah," she says. "Now, that, I'm afraid I must keep." I stare at her. "Oh, come on, Bright Phoenix; what do you think I went to all that trouble for?" I still don't understand. "You know the old bat. She can never have enough of anything, because nothing is enough to fill her miserable hungry heart. She was never going to sell me something I wanted; the moment I wanted

it, she had to want it more. If I was going to get what I came for, I was going to have to make her give it to me."

"You wanted my other grannie's cloth?"

"You really don't know what it is, do you? These cloths stay in families for generations; they almost never leave this island. It's the real thing, child, ancient and beautiful and maybe even powerful, if you know what you're doing. I don't. But there are those who do, or think they do, and they'll pay a lot for something like that, if they think it was given freely and its power intact."

"But it wasn't hers to give. It's mine."

She pulls my cloth from her hanging sleeve, and unfolds it and drapes it around her shoulders. Wrapped in the scent and colors of my past, the stranger looks at me, and I seem to see what she sees: a young girl with dark hair sleek as ebony, lips stung with kisses moist and lightly parted, revealing teeth like pearls; even her eyes gemmed with unshed tears.

"Will you give me your cloth?" she asks.

"No."

"Will you sell it to me?"

I think of what she's given me already. I'm seized with a longing like pain —for her kisses, for her freedom…"Take me with you," I whisper. "Please."

"No. Not yet. You're too young yet to give yourself freely."

"That is my price."

She slides the fine weaving from off her shoulders, begins folding it up for me. She's going to leave me with nothing.

"Wait," I say. "Wait. I want three things from you. Give me three things, and the cloth is yours."

"Tell me."

"First, your name."

"Jessica. It's Jessica Campion."

"What does that mean?"

"In my language? Nothing, really. Campion is some kind of flower, but in my land we carry our fathers' names. Like you, I am the daughter of a great house. I left my home and my family to pursue other things that pleased me more."

"That's the first thing."

"And the second?"

I blush, but say it: "A lock of your hair."

Hair is strength and spirit. She takes a tiny silver scissors from her belt. She cuts a long lock from the crown of her head and winds it round and round my fingers. I close my hand on it.

"And the third?"

"The third is a promise. I want your promise to return."

"How do you know I'll keep it?" she mocks gently.

"Because you're going to give me something precious."

She smiles, so that the lines around her eyes dance. How old is she really? Ten years older than I am, her face toughened by weather and the sea? "A gift of the heart?"

"No, indeed, Jessica Campion." I like using her name; it makes me feel powerful. "I'm from a merchant's house, remember? I'll take something real, something you value enough to come back for. How about that jewel in your ear?"

Her hand flies to it. "Oh, this? It's not worth much—not even a fraction of the value of your *kchin*, let alone that cloth—"

"That's why I want it, Jessica Campion."

"Oh?" She looks a little cold, a bit displeased. But I am used to that. So I persist. "You always touch it," I say, "whenever you are thinking hard. I do not think you'll want to be without it long."

Her moonlit face breaks into a grin. "You wretch!" she says. "You're a quick study. All right, here. But be careful with it—it's one of the family rubies. I don't dare go home without it."

I wonder if she has an Omama, too.

I reach up my hand to her, the hand wrapped with her hair. I touch her cheek. It is warm. She bows her head to me, and nuzzles my face, and moves to my lips. Our kisses are so many I lose count of them. When at last I get my breath I say to her, "There is your promise, sealed. Don't stay away too long."

"You'll hardly know I'm gone."

I fold the cloth for her, and place it in her sleeve myself. Like a shadow I have kissed, she leaves the garden then, taking with her all my past. But I have gotten my future in return.

The FALL of the KINGS

Ellen Kushner & Delia Sherman

For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth.
A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.

—OSCAR WILDE, *The Truth of Masks*

What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage

—EZRA POUND, *Pisan Cantos*, LXXXI

the FALL of the KINGS

PROLOGUE

A SPLATTER OF RED ON A DISCARDED BOOT. MILKY blue glass lying shattered in a pool of water. Garlands of greenery swirling everywhere, with little eddies of leaves torn loose from them. And everywhere the sheets, torrents of white fabric lying in fantastic patterns, twisted and ruched, almost spinning, creating lines dipped in and out of shadow, now black, now white, following the logic of the candles placed above them, interrupted here and there by the crosshatching of random streaks of harsh, dull red.

The sheets spilled over the edge of a platform; in front of it, a naked man, streaked in the same red, his long hair matted with it, but clotted also with bits of ochre and vermilion, burnt sienna and indigo.

The woman watching him from across the room was silent. She was dressed from neck to ankle in a plain white smock, smeared in places with the same colors. Her hair was bound up with a twisted scarf, leaving her face a clear and perfect oval.

"Theron," she said. "You moved. I have particularly asked you not to do that."

With one hand he tore a sheet from the platform, sending spatters of paint flying in every direction. "What will you paint, then," he shouted, "the aftermath, the destruction you have wrought?"

"*I* have wrought? I'm not the one who's just torn the studio apart. Now, would you please take up the pose again?"

He froze, staring at her. "You have no heart."

"I told you that, ages ago." She dipped her finger in the paint of her canvas and sketched his lines into it. "You should listen to me. I said this would be the last painting I wanted you for. Stand still, I'm not done with you yet. I'm using you for the murderer as well as for the king. It makes a nice effect."

Incredulous, he almost laughed. "You want me to pose killing myself."

"I *want* you to put your body in some interesting positions—"

The laugh burst out. "Oh—haven't I been satisfying you that way, either?"

"Theron." Still sketching with naked fingers, she talked. "You have satisfied me entirely. I've got maybe twenty-five finished canvases, and dozens of studies. You have been satisfying in every sense. But I've run out of things for you to do. I've told you all along, no one can hold me forever. I can't find any more ways to enjoy you."

A year ago he would have shown her one or two on the spot. Now he said, "Ysaud. Please." She shook her head as though the noise were a distraction. "Paint what you like, who you like—I don't care. But don't send me away."

"I don't want you if I'm not painting you."

"You're mad."

"You've just wasted a lot of my materials, Theron." She crossed the floor to take a dab of ochre from his chest with one finger.

"Don't do this to me. I love you."

"Please hold still."

He lifted a hand to his chest. Where her finger had run **over** his collarbone, there lay exposed a pattern of vines and leaves. It had been etched into his skin with ink.

"You can't take this back," he said, "nor what it means. It marks me forever yours."

"No," she said. "It's the paintings that mark you forever mine." She returned to her canvas. "My vision of you will be alive when your pretty skin is turned to dust. That should make you happy."

"Stop," he said. "Stop painting and look at me."

Now it was she who laughed. "All I've done is look at you. If you can't stop talking, then put on your clothes and go." He followed her, breaking an unspoken law of the studio, treading on forbidden ground, a space he entered only with her permission. The artist glared at him. Then, with a hiss of exasperation, she stepped back and let him go around the easel to see what stood there.

Coming alive in the candlelight was an image of death: a pale man splayed out on the bed, one hand lying open as if in invitation, the other still clutching a deerskin across his chest. Theron recognized himself, his own body in the languor after sex. The deerskin and bedsheets were speckled with blood. Next to them, she had begun another figure. His dark hair was a waterfall of grief spilling between the hands he pressed to his face with bloody fingers. A shadow of horns rose on the wall behind them, as if a phantom stag had lifted its head.

"This is different," Theron said, "from the others."

"Yes." She observed the canvas and the man together. "This is the last of them; it has to be, you see, because it's heading off in a new direction. That's how I know the series is over."

"I could be a new direction for you."

"No, you can't." Ysaud pressed his chest gently with the brush's tip. "Not you. Not for me. Go be a new direction for someone else, will you?"

He went out into the night, caked with her colors. He was very sure that he would never love again.

book I

HARVEST TERM

chapter I

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO AND MORE, A KING RODE out of the North at the head of an army. He rode with a company of splendid men, all armed to the teeth. They rode not to war, but to a wedding. After centuries of conflict, the rocky North and the fertile South were at last to be joined into one kingdom in the persons of their King and Queen and their heirs perpetual, united against their common enemies and increasing in mutual prosperity.

The Southern Queen's Chronicler, Valerian Hollis, had described the King's army in horrified detail. Their armor was leather and hammered bronze. Under their helms, their long hair was braided with leather and bones and beads and even nuggets of gold. Every one of them was blood kin to his king, and as they came through the streets of the capital city, they sang.

In the eyes of the Southern nobles, the King's Companions were strange enough, with their barbaric mien and their uncouth songs of war and the hunt. But they brought with them men that they called wizards, and the wizards were worse.

The wizards did not sing. Indeed, they barely spoke, except to one another. There were (according to Hollis) fifteen of them, riding horseback just behind the king. The King's Wizards were robed in black or brown, russet or ochre: peasants' colors, colors of the land. Some were cloaked in the skins of animals. Their faces were bearded, their hair unbound and crowned with leaves. From the hands of certain of them, tendrils of ivy grew.

Thus wrote Hollis in the final chapter of his *Chronicle History of the Northern Kings*, a work written at the behest of Queen Diane and her new consort, Alcuin, later called the Diplomat. It was a book every historian should own; Basil St Cloud had bought his when he was still a student, and lived on bread and cheese for the rest of the month to pay for the used, leather-bound volume. Now he was a Doctor of History, and the margins of its pages were lined with notes, the leather cover buttery with handling. But it had failed to enlighten him on the subject he was currently researching.

With a sigh, he set the volume aside. If only Hollis had not insisted on cluttering up his account with so much about the wonder of these so-called wizards. Wizards, indeed! The very word evoked nameless rituals and dark

mysteries, when everyone knew that their "magic" had been nothing more than sleight-of-hand coupled with diplomacy. But they certainly had made an impressive show. As many times as Basil had read the description, it still gave him a chill: "…their hair so twined about with leaves of Ivie and of Oak, as to make them seem in themselves to be Trees and Creatures of the Wood come riding into our Citie to take it through the Greening of the verrie Stones…"

Basil shook his head. Very pretty. Very fanciful. Charged with collecting facts from his new compatriots, but unable to understand most of what they said, Hollis had simply conflated history and legend. Still, the book was pretty much all modern scholars had to go by. The pre-Union North was known for the strength of its warriors, not its record-keeping. And Hollis really had witnessed the events of the Union. Now, if only he'd been more interested in laws of inheritance than in trees on horseback…

A knock on his door interrupted his fulminations. "St Cloud!" He recognized the voice of his friend Thomas Elton, Doctor of Astronomy. "St Cloud, I know you're in there, now open up!"

Without regret, the historian opened the door to his rooms. "How now, my fair one!" It was an old joke. Elton had the face and figure of a bull-dog, but his hair, which he wore long by University tradition, was an incongruously beautiful honey-colored mane that his friends loved to tease him about. "Have you come all this way to invite me to dinner, or do you just want to stick your ridiculous astral spyglass out my window again?"

Elton grinned. "I'll accept your kind offer, if it ever clears up. You live so much closer to the heavens than the rest of us, and I want to get another good look at that comet. Stars with fiery hair, they don't come around that often. And this one's such a beauty, Basil."

"Yes, you've said. But that's not what you're here for."

"Right. If I thought you had any wine to offer me I'd make you produce it —but instead, I come to tell you that there's been a sighting of Leonard Rugg in the fiery precincts of the Blackbird's Nest, ordering the ingredients for a brandy-punch!"

Basil said archly, "I don't suppose it was Cassius who spotted him?"

"*And* is saving us a couple of seats."

"Blessed Cassius." Basil finally found his cap and jammed it on his head. "A mathematician can always be relied upon to count the right number of

guests. Onward, let us onward, like the invading Ophidian army on the Plains of Garrawan. Look out for the broken step."

The streets of the University were the streets of the city, and some of the oldest. They lay on the east bank of the river, where, it was said, King Alcuin's wizards had first taken up residence after the Union. Certainly the streets were close and twisty and notoriously difficult to navigate, particularly late at night. The school had been tiny at first, not much more than a few classrooms nestled in a warren of government edifices. But time and history had wrought their changes. Buildings that once had been halls of state were now lecture halls, and the dens of civil servants and kings' companions had been turned to students' quarters, rented out to as many aspiring young scholars as could fit in a room. The taverns that dotted every corner were probably the oldest structures that retained their purpose. Across the troubled maelstrom of time, people always need a beer.

The tavern known as the Blackbird's Nest was awash in the dark-robed scholars who gave it its name. Its ceiling was low and black-beamed, its ancient walls as deep as a man's arm from hand to elbow, its windows sunk in alcoves. The feet of untold generations of drinkers and debaters had worn troughs into the stone of its floor; their shoulders had polished the stone walls black and smooth. Basil had been coming there since he was a young student, fresh off the farm—not as many years ago as he liked to think. He'd met Elton and Cassius there, accomplished scholars of two years' standing. They had advised him on University ways, from simple matters like letting your hair grow long to avoid looking like a country bumpkin and always giving way to a magister on the street to the intricacies of getting credit in a tavern and the maximum number of lectures he might attend without paying the magister a fee. And they'd invited him along with them to meet the brilliant young Doctor of Metaphysics, Leonard Rugg, known for his generosity with the punchbowl and his stimulating debates on everything from women to the meaning of the stars.

For all four men, the meeting had been a momentous one. The three young scholars had found a shrewd mentor; Rugg had found three kindred spirits. He was not surprised when each of them had resisted the world's call for educated men to stock its law courts and schoolrooms, its nobles' secretarial staffs and charitable institutions. Elton, Cassius, and finally St

Cloud remained at University, become Fellows and then Doctors of their chosen subjects, and had been licensed to lecture by the Governors. The four of them had become a familiar sight: Basil St Cloud of History, sturdy and pale, with perennially stubbled cheeks and black, unruly hair; Thomas Elton of Astronomy, stocky and cheerful; Lucas Cassius of Mathematics, lean and saturnine; and Leonard Rugg of Metaphysics, not nearly as old as he pretended to be, his skin pink, his forehead high, his thinning reddish hair standing out from his scalp like new-shorn fleece.

"Time marches on," Rugg was saying testily to Cassius, "but the boy with the brandy is slower than a tart with a noble client. And didn't you say young St Cloud and Elton were coming?"

"On their way," the mathematician answered. "Remember, patience is the virtue of the truly wise."

Rugg snorted. "Nonsense. Patience gets you nothing but a cold bed. Who's been filling your head with platitudes, eh? Your old mother?"

"Placid," Cassius said smugly, "in his *Of Manners and Morals*. I remember you lecturing on it, Leonard. You were, of course, much more eloquent at the time."

"Don't you quote Placid to me, you damned cabbage-counter. Always thought Placid was a damned fool," Rugg said, "when he wasn't being a genius. Ah, here's the brandy!"

Easing a laden tray onto the table, the potboy unloaded two steaming jugs, four heavy pottery mugs, and several little dishes containing sugar and spices. Rugg pushed back his bench, stood ponderously, cracked his knuckles and began to assemble the punch. A savor of cinnamon and cloves rose above the table in an alcoholic cloud.

"Is that brandy-punch I smell?" Elton said brightly, looming over them.

"It will be," Rugg answered, "if you don't jog my arm. Sit down, Elton—no, over there, with St Cloud. Basil, dear boy, where have you been hiding?"

"Nowhere I can't be found," Basil answered mildly, "as Elton has just happily proved."

Cassius sighed with an exaggerated melancholy, and laced his skinny fingers in his lanky hair. "Would that all proofs were so easily made! Basil, I hear you're writing another book, and good for you. In fact," he caught Elton's eye across the table, "very good for you, indeed."

"Which means what, exactly?"

Basil's question went unanswered as Rugg lifted the ladle high and made a brief speech about friendship and taverns and wine. Rugg favored the rhetorical style of the Gerardine metaphysicians, his current academic preoccupation. Basil cupped his hands around his steaming mug. Autumn was coming on chill this year.

The four friends toasted each other and the beginning of the Harvest Term, wishing each other plenty of paying students for all and a new, more faithful mistress for Rugg. They ordered up a dinner of roast chicken, greens, and buttered squash, and tucked into it as if they'd not eaten for days.

"The Horn Chair lecture's back on, had you heard?" Elton asked through a mouthful of chicken.

"Impossible," said Rugg. "The Horn Professor's at death's door. Has been since Midsummer."

Cassius sipped his punch. "It's not like you to be so far behind the gossip, Rugg. Doctor Tortua *was* at death's door, but he's better now. Not enough better, I'd have thought, to go about giving public lectures, but I'm no physician. You were Tortua's man, St Cloud. What do you know about it?"

St Cloud shrugged. "Not much. We haven't been friendly since my monograph on the Treaty of Arkenvelt."

"I remember," said Rugg. "You took his chapter in *The Fall of the Kings* and made mincemeat of it, didn't you, against all advice and common sense."

"But he got it wrong, and all because he didn't go back to the treaty itself and relied instead on Delgardie's report in *A Mirror of History*, which was already second-hand at best. As I said at the time." He glared at Rugg, who looked ready to argue the whole point again. "It's done, Rugg, and can't be undone. Doctor Crabbe's his heir apparent now, and much joy may he have of him."

"You're hopeless, Basil." Elton looked over his shoulder into the Blackbird's noisy, candlelit room. "Doesn't Roger Crabbe drink here too?"

"I haven't seen him," St Cloud said. "Not since Spring Term, not here."

"Well, his friends, then. You don't need to like Crabbe, but there's nothing to be gained by making an enemy of him."

"And what would his friends tell him?" St Cloud demanded. "He already knows I don't like him; I've told him as much to his face. And he's welcome to hear that I'm sorry I quarreled with Doctor Tortua—well, not sorry, exactly, since I'd do the same again. But sad. I'd like to make it up with him."

The eminent doctor had recognized in the young St Cloud a love of ancient things that matched his own. In Basil's second year, he'd wooed him away from the law he'd come to the city to study and shepherded him up through University ranks. It was Tortua's influence, as well as his own industry, that had made Basil the youngest man ever to achieve the rank of Doctor. He had loved the old man like a father, and had been proportionately wounded when Tortua had taken Basil's monograph on the Treaty of Arkenvelt as a personal attack rather than a simple scholarly correction.

"Make it up with him!" scoffed Elton. "I doubt Tortua would even see you, especially as Crabbe's his doorkeeper these days, they say."

"I thought Crabbe was avoiding me," St Cloud said.

"You flatter yourself," said Cassius. "He was nursing Tortua."

"Lobbying to be the next Horn Chair of Ancient History, if you ask me," Elton said, and Rugg nodded.

"That's disgusting," exclaimed St Cloud. "Not even Crabbe would do a thing like that."

His three companions exchanged the superior smiles of men who, knowing a friend's weakness, love him in spite of it.

"So," said Rugg after a pause, "are you still going to the lecture?"

St Cloud, with little else to stand on, stood on his dignity. "Of course I'm going. I'm in ancient history. I'd go whoever was giving the lecture, even if it were Crabbe himself."

"We'll see you there, then," said Elton cheerfully.

"Yes," said Cassius. "Sit with us. You can tell us when he's getting it wrong."

"You'll just have to figure it out for yourselves," Basil St Cloud told them. "I shall be sitting with my students."

chapter II

THE KINGS RULED THE UNITED KINGDOM FOR better than three hundred years before they were deposed by the nobles, who established rule by the Council of Lords. The later kings had been a byword for decadence and corruption, with special emphasis on assassination, rape, and excessive taxation. Of their special councilors, the wizards, the less said the better; progress and the Council of Lords swept even their memory aside. The country prospered. Technology advanced. Carriages were invented, and the nobles left their town-houses in the Riverside district behind, seduced by the broad avenues and terraced banks of the Hill that lay across the river-bank northwest of the Old City. There they built magnificent houses set in exquisite gardens sweeping down to the river.

The lords of the city did have a tendency to quarrel amongst themselves, though, especially in the Council's early days. There were high walls around their gardens and guards at the gates. But even these were not enough to protect a man from the fury of his peers and their relations when blood feuds heated up. To keep the important people from killing each other off, a class of professional swordsmen evolved to take on the nobles' challenges, and elaborate rules were constructed to keep them within the bounds of law. Some of the houses still boasted the traditional liveried swordsman, but not all. Times had changed, as times will. Like the swordsmen, the walls around the Hill's great houses were chiefly decorative. But not all. The gates of Arlen House, in particular, were not easily breached. Behind them lived and worked the Serpent Chancellor of the Council of Lords, Geoffrey, Lord Arlen. Like the serpent, he was cunning

and elusive and well-defended. No one entered Arlen House except by invitation. And even then, the Serpent Chancellor was not so easily seen.

LORD NICHOLAS GALING LEANED HIS FOREHEAD against the window of Arlen House and watched the clouds rolling away over the river. It had rained all afternoon, and even now the occasional drop pocked the wet stone of the promenade outside. The room Galing was waiting in was warm and dry and furnished with a set of books on natural history. Still, he had been waiting there for three hours.

He turned from the window and examined the tray his absent host had sent in some minutes earlier. Old cheese, new bread, a decanter of deep red wine, a silver pitcher of water. An apple and autumn pears, along with a pearl-handled knife to peel them with: enough food to acknowledge that he'd been kept waiting longer than expected; not enough to indicate that he would be kept waiting all the afternoon.

He took the knife and an apple and peeled it in a thin, continuous spiral, which he arranged jauntily on the edge of the tray. Then he sat down with the cheese and the decanter by the excellent fire to refresh himself. When the summons came, it wouldn't do to appear before Arlen hungry or —he replaced the decanter on the tray and filled his glass with water— inattentive in any way. This meeting could make or break him with the enigmatic Serpent Chancellor. Nicholas had spent the past year maneuvering his way into Lord Arlen's sphere, and had obliged his mysterious lordship in one or two small matters of interest to the Council, matters in which discretion and the ability to ask innocent-sounding questions had proved useful.

Nicholas smiled into the fire. He'd had no idea, going in, how exciting it was simply to have a secret. His new profession transmuted balls, picnics, card parties, even morning calls on ladies whose lowered lids and low-cut gowns held no allure for him into backdrops for *a* drama understood by only a select few. Everyone knew that Lady Talbot was enjoying a liaison with the Montrose heir, but only Nicholas—and Emil Montrose, and now the Council—knew that Emil was also enjoying the revenues of Lady Talbot's farm in Stover, which he was plowing into his own exhausted estates. What

Arlen and the Council would do with this information, Nicholas neither knew nor cared. The thing at the moment was to know it.

The door opened, and the soft-footed servant who had brought the tray slipped inside and cleared his throat.

"Lord Nicholas. Lord Arlen will see you now, if you would be so good as to follow me."

The servant showed Nicholas into a largish room lined with old books and panels of painted wood—portraits, Nicholas supposed, of Arlens dead and gone. He was about to take a closer look at one when a small noise froze him where he stood, breathing slowly to still the sudden pelting of his heart. When he was sure he had himself under control, he turned to face the shadowy corner of the room and bowed deeply.

"Lord Arlen," he said. "How delightful."

A deep chuckle came from the shadows, followed by the scrape and flare of a lucifer, which revealed a tall, white-haired man sitting behind a great carved desk. He put the flame to the wick of an ornate brass lamp and replaced the glass.

"Do you mean my making you kick your heels for hours, or do you mean my trying to startle you out of your skin?"

Nicholas reflected that it was more pleasant to play with tigers when you weren't in the cage with them and said, "I mean, delightful to see you, sir, and your beautiful house."

"I already know you are a plausible rogue, Galing," said Lord Arlen. "You needn't keep trying to impress me. Sit down, do. And take a glass of wine. I'm going to ask you a favor."

Nicholas carefully poured himself two fingers of crimson liquid from a gold-chased decanter.

"Very good," said Arlen when Nicholas was settled. "Your hand didn't shake and your face showed no more than polite interest. You handled the Montrose affair very well, did I tell you?"

Nicholas made a gesture expressive of modesty and pleasure. "I am your lordship's to command," he said.

"Yes," Lord Arlen said. "I believe you are just the kind of man who will betray any confidence as long as he's sure that it's in the service of some greater good, preferably his own."

Nicholas was able to school his expression, but felt an angry flush rising up his cheeks. "I believe I serve your lordship," he said stiffly.

"Fifty years ago," remarked Lord Arlen, "you could have cried challenge on me for that statement, hired a swordsman to do the deed for you, and the Court of Honor would have held you justified even as I wallowed in my gore. Times change. I have a swordsman in my employ for the look of the thing, and he's very good. But I don't expect I'll ever need his services, not in the same way my father did."

"No," said Nicholas evenly. "I don't expect you will. I can't afford a first-class swordsman, as you very well know, and I'm not really inclined to cry challenge on you for speaking the truth, particularly as there's no one else present."

Lord Arlen smiled, his dark eyes bright in the lamplight. He was a handsome man, with the kind of long, lean face that ages well and beautifully curved lips, oddly sensual in his ascetic countenance. "It's a pleasure to talk to a man who understands what he's being told. It's the only kind of fencing that custom allows us, eh?" He leaned forward, laid something on the desk in front of Nicholas, and sat back again. "Tell me what you make of that."

It looked like an oak leaf, leathery and dry, curled at one end. When Nicholas picked it up, it proved to be carved out of wood. The workmanship was competent but not fine. There was a pin affixed to the back so that the leaf might be worn as a brooch. Nicholas turned it over in his hand. "Not your usual taste, Lord Arlen," he said.

"Not my taste at all," said Arlen shortly. "It belonged to a man from the North, from Hartsholt. I believe he carved it himself."

Nicholas set the trinket on the desk, where it lay as if blown in through the window, incongruous and faintly disturbing. "It means a great deal to him, then."

"He won't be missing it," Arlen said. "He bled himself to death by chafing in his chains. I wouldn't have thought it possible myself, but the guards are sure no one entered his cell. The brooch was taken from him when he was arrested. What do you think of it?"

Nicholas picked up the brooch again and examined it closely. If it had any secrets, they weren't to be read in the tiny marks left by the dead man's knife. It was the brooch itself that was important. "A badge," said Nicholas

thoughtfully. "You said the man was from Hartsholt. I seem to remember the Duke of Hartsholt at Lord Halliday's, complaining about troublemakers over dinner. Now that I think about it, I do recall something about oak branches."

"Yes," purred Lord Arlen. "Now, cast your mind even further back than Halliday's dinner, to your schoolroom lessons. What was the most significant event in our history?"

Nicholas thought for a moment. "The fall of the monarchy."

"Before that."

"I never cared much for history," Galing said. "I don't know. Unless"—he groped at a distant memory—"you mean the union of the kingdoms."

Arlen smiled benignly. "Precisely," he said. "And would you happen to remember where the old capital of the North Kingdom was?"

"Ah—Aldersyde? No, it's Hartsholt, isn't it—that's why Hartsholt's a duchy."

"Very good, Galing. The capital was indeed in Hartsholt, or somewhere near it—there's nothing left of it now. So tell me, Lord Nicholas, what do you deduce from available evidence?"

It was like pacing through honey, trying to figure out why Arlen was leading him this dance.

"I'm being most unkind, making you go through all this," Arlen remarked sympathetically. "But really, it would be a shame for all that expensive tutoring your father gave you to go to waste. As I recall, you even flirted with the University for a year or two."

"I went to a few lectures, to keep my friend Edward Tielman company."

"Ah, yes. Edward Tielman. Secretary to the Crescent Chancellor. Very sound man. Discreet. His father was your family's steward, wasn't he?"

"He still is," said Nicholas shortly. Did Arlen know he and Edward had been lovers? Was he asking whether they still were? Why should he care? Because Edward was somehow connected to the favor Arlen wanted from him, Nicholas answered himself—Edward and the old capital at (or near) Hartsholt and the oak leaf brooch and the dead man from the North. There was one thing missing, one fact connected to his schooldays, when his tutor had taught spelling and rhetoric and mathematics and history to him, to his older brother the heir, and to Edward, the steward's son.

"The kings," Nicholas said slowly. "Before the Union, the kings lived in the old capital city. There was a sacred grove, wasn't there? An oak grove." Lord Arlen nodded, very much as the tutor had nodded, glad to see his student performing well. "The man from Hartsholt must have been a royalist, and you think this oak leaf is a royalist badge. And you want me to use Tielman's connections at the University to find out if there are royalists there, too."

Arlen laughed. "That's the bones of it. Very good." Nicholas felt himself flushing again, this time with pleasure and something else, something he knew Lord Arlen was unlikely to return.

"Quite," said the older man, disconcertingly. "Now. You are no doubt asking yourself why I am concerned about a handful of unlettered hobbledehoys whose ancestors have been diverting themselves with rebellions for five hundred years."

Nicholas made a gesture designed to convey his complete confidence in the Serpent Chancellor's political acuity.

"Nevertheless. The situation is this. The current Duke of Hartsholt's a wastrel and a bad landlord. His steward is a thief, and his heir is as great a spendthrift as his sire. And it's not only Hartsholt's private estates that are suffering. There is famine all through the North, and great poverty. Young men are pouring down to the South, looking to better themselves. There's nothing wrong with that—it's what the ancient kings did, after all. But there are more of them every year, and all of them are angry. They wear their Northernness like a flag, flaunt their braided hair and their barbaric customs, shout out incomprehensible Northern slogans in City Sessions. This fellow"—Arlen touched the oak leaf—"was all too comprehensible. He got up in open Sessions before the Mayor and offered a formal petition for the king to be restored to the land."

Nicholas felt as amused as shocked—it seemed like such a stupid, pointless thing to do. But Arlen was studying him gravely, no hint of amusement lighting his face. "What did he imagine it would gain him?" he offered diplomatically.

"I don't know," said Arlen. "All he would say under questioning was that the land needed its king again, and the time was at hand."

"Is it a general uprising, then?"

"No. I don't think so. It's more like creeping sedition, with mystic complications. Call it an illness. We need to study it, to discover whether it's a plague or a mild fever. I've sent men North. I need someone here, to determine the extent of the contagion and its severity." He leaned forward slightly. The effect was of a dark lantern suddenly unshuttered. "I need to know if these royalists have a specific king in mind, and whether it's one of them or one of us." He lounged back in his chair again. "There's what they would consider to be royal blood in all the noble houses, you know."

A light tap heralded Lord Arlen's servant, carrying a tray of cold beef. They sat in silence while he pulled the heavy blue curtains over the rainy darkness and lit the lamps. When he'd bowed himself out again, Nicholas helped himself to a slice of beef. "I didn't know," he continued, as if they'd not been interrupted. "As I said, I don't know much about history."

"You'd best learn, then." Arlen yawned suddenly and rubbed his face. "Your friend Tielman may be able to help you. I understand he keeps up his University friendships."

Nicholas smiled, glad to catch his patron out. "Tielman goes down to University twice a year to get drunk with his old friends and impress them with his being the Crescent Chancellor's secretary—it's his pet vice. If he suddenly started asking questions, it would occasion remark."

"Do what you think best, then. If I didn't trust your judgment, I wouldn't have asked your help. This affair of the oak leaf may be nothing, but it may equally be very important. It would be a pity if you guessed wrong." He fixed Nicholas with his hooded eyes.

"Of course, sir," said Nicholas quietly. "I won't fail you."

"Quite." Lord Arlen nodded, and rang for the servant to show Galing to the door.

ACROSS THE RIVER, IN AN OLD, OLD HOUSE OF STONE, a young man slept, and as he slept, he dreamed. In his dream he stood in an oak wood, very old, with dusty sunlight pouring down in bars around him. He moved forward carefully, not sure of what he might find. There was a clearing ahead, a grove. As he entered it, his body was bathed in golden light. He heard a voice: "Welcome, Little King." A man was standing in the shadows,

by a pool of still water, amongst bushes of dark green holly. He was afraid of the man; but all the man said was, "Welcome. I have been waiting. You come on your time, and now we can begin."

The man held up a deer's skin, and a stone knife, sharp as glass. "Do not be afraid," he said, but the dreamer was afraid. He shuddered, and the oak leaves fell around him.

chapter III

THE HARVEST TERM HAD BEGUN. ON THE STREETS of University, students were suddenly everywhere, a constant tide of long black robes, rushing from tavern to lecture and back again. Window-stalls along the winding streets did a brisk trade in steamed buns and pens and penknives and tomato pies and other scholarly necessities. Excited male voices bounced off the stone of buildings and cobbles, arguing, bargaining, greeting friends.

To Basil St Cloud, the noise of the University streets was pure music: a concert of learning, of ambition and community. And the sight of the black-robed students, punctuated by the colored sleeves of the University Doctors (green for Humane Sciences, red for Physic, yellow for Natural Sciences, white for Law), was all he needed to gladden his eye. He moved through the lively streets on his way to the Great Hall and Doctor Tortua's lecture like a fish swimming the ocean, answering greetings and ducking out of the way of the occasional heedless student with a smile.

The Great Hall was where the kings had once held their audiences; now, it was the place for public lectures—particularly appropriate, Basil thought, for a lecture on ancient history. Anyone could come to a public lecture, and this one was drawing quite a crowd. Under the frieze of watchful stone kings, the Hall's broad steps were as crowded as the plaza outside a theatre. From stalls at the bronze feet of the Anselmian statues of Reason and Imagination flanking the steps, people hawked nuts and drinks and even green ribbons in honor of the Humanities. Basil pushed his way through a swarm of scholars, the bright sleeves of his doctor's gown allowing him precedence, until he finally reached the floor of the Great Hall itself.

"Hey! Doctor St Cloud! Over here!"

It was one of Basil's students, Benedict Vandeleur, waving his sleeve like a black flag.

"We've kept you a seat, sir!" Vandeleur's confident baritone carried easily over the buzz and chatter of conversation. "Fremont," Vandeleur ordered the man next to him. "Go fetch Doctor St Cloud."

The seats in the Great Hall were built up in a horseshoe around three sides of the high, vaulted room, bench rising on hard wooden bench. The benches were full; even the steps were packed solid. Henry Fremont was adroit enough, St Cloud noticed, to step only on students; he followed him nimbly back up the same route.

Vandeleur must have been there for hours to get such good seats. St Cloud had a clear view not only of the dais and the high-arched painted glass window above it, but of one leg of the horseshoe and the men sitting there. He saw Tom Elton, Cassius, and Rugg, as promised, and below them a clutch of brightly-clad nobles. Gone were the days when the city's young nobility would rather admit to drinking bad wine than to attending a serious lecture. Now there was a certain prestige in spending a year or two just learning something useless like mathematics or astronomy. When they became men of power and wealth, some still came to University to revisit the intellectual stimulation of their Youth, or to attend public lectures by the distinguished doctors who held Chairs in their disciplines. Basil didn't mind them; they were colorful, and when they attended his own lectures, they paid up.

In the front row, hard by the dais, was the narrow, dark face of Roger Crabbe, Doctor of History. He was chatting with a University Governor,

but he stopped quickly when an old man began shakily mounting the stage.

"Is that Tortua?" Fremont asked. "He looks a hundred years old. Two hundred. He looks like he knew Gerard the Last King personally."

St Cloud stared at Doctor Tortua with horrified pity. The old magister moved as if he were walking over smooth ice, and even from the other side of the great room St Cloud could see him trembling and nodding. Tortua arranged his notes on the podium, perched a pair of round spectacles on his nose, and began to speak.

In a few minutes it became painfully clear that rumor had only exaggerated a sad truth. Gone was the mellifluous voice Basil remembered and the great analytical mind that had driven it.

"Welcome to you all." His voice was a barely audible mumble, but the lofty vault of the Great Hall caught it up and magnified it. "I wrote a book, you know, and I doubt I shall write another one. So I wish to share with you today…with you today…" He fumbled with his notes. "Oh, yes. Now, this is very interesting. The court wizards were curious sorts. They made rituals out of everything—like women, eh?—only worse. Even the act of love. Especially the act of love. Vespas writes of goings-on between the first kings and their court wizards that would bring blushes to a dockman's cheek. There was a reason for it all, he said, but the annoying bastard did not say what it was. Apart from the obvious, of course."

Basil winced. It was all too clear that his illness had robbed Doctor Tortua of his discretion as well as everything else.

"Of course the kings were very naughty. And as we know, the wizards were worse. They encouraged them. How else could they do it? They didn't fight—the king and his Companions did that. This was in the North, of course. I'm speaking of the Northern kings. Who were ruled by the wizards. A king who doesn't rule…what, then, does he do, eh? Answer me that! He is ruled by powerful men who—who—well, I don't like to say, but scholarship demands—who *dominate* him…"

This was intolerable. The nobles left, not very quietly. A clutch of scarlet-robed Governors conferred in shocked whispers. Basil shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Pity and grief for his old magister's public decline warred in him with acute embarrassment. He took refuge in studying the ancient stained glass window, brought, it was said, by Alcuin from Hartsholt in the North. It was very beautiful, a window onto a bright, sharp world. A

hart knelt to a man robed in a bear's pelt, who held a collar of gold suspended above the hart's antlered head. A pool of blue water sparkled at their feet and a flat, golden sky arced over their heads.

The sun burned down through the colored glass of the window, flooding one bank of benches in green and brown and gold and blue. Basil's eye was caught by a young man sitting there, a young man of remarkable beauty. He was slouched forward in his seat with his ankle on one knee, his elbow on the other, and his chin in his hand, looking very interested and somewhat puzzled. The light burnished his long fall of dark hair and gilded his pale skin, making him look as bright and sharp as the stained glass. As St Cloud stared, he looked up, and their eyes met across the horseshoe.

The young man smiled deeply at him and St Cloud hastily turned his gaze back to Doctor Tortua.

"So you see—you see—"

Between one word and the next, Doctor Tortua dropped all his notes and began painfully, terrifyingly to bend down to gather them up again. Then Roger Crabbe was standing beside him, holding him upright with one strong hand, gesturing angrily to a servant, who brought forward a chair. Doctor Crabbe eased the old man into the seat and at last, at long last, Doctor Tortua fell silent.

For a horrible moment, St Cloud thought no one was going to do anything. Then a furious clapping broke out on the lower benches. Soon the hall was ringing with somewhat hysterical cheering. Some men began to push toward the dais. Out of pity and ancient affection, St Cloud joined them. Flanked by his students, he made his way to the front of the crowd, and greeted the old man respectfully, braced against a rebuff.

"Welcome back, Doctor Tortua. It's good to see you so well."

Doctor Tortua peered shortsightedly at him, lifted his silver-rimmed glasses from his lap, and hooked them over his ears. "Thank you, young man. I don't think…"

Roger Crabbe leaned over his shoulder. A short man, he didn't have to lean very far. His features were large for his narrow face: a heavy nose, lips made for sneering, and shallow-set, heavy-lidded eyes of a curious pale brown that was almost gold. "It's Basil St Cloud," he informed Tortua. "He was a student of yours. He lectures now in Ancient History."

Ignoring Crabbe, Basil said, "You took on a difficult topic, Doctor."

The old man drew up all his wrinkles like a pleased tortoise. "Why, thank you, young man," he said. "Thank you. Yes. The court wizards. Fascinating. I have been rethinking Vespas's *The Book of Kings*. We've been misreading him all these years." He munched his jaws as if chewing upon Vespas.

"Misreading?" prompted Basil.

"Misreading. Though Crabbe here doesn't want me to talk about it." The old man shot a sharp look at his colleague. "Read a lot over again, you know, when I was ill—Delgardie's *Mirror of History*, Vespas; I even went back and read Hollis's chronicles. And do you know, they all mention the same things: the intimacy between wizard and king, the mysterious ritual of coronation, the killing of a deer. What do you think of that, eh? All of them. Do you know what I think? I think it's because it's true!"

"What's true, sir?"

"Why, that the wizards of the North really did work magic, you foolish boy!"

By now, all that was left of the lecture audience was crowded around them, listening to the discussion with breathless attention. Nobody denied that the kings had had their wizards, sinister and mysterious counselors with roots in ancient barbaric ritual that could be mistaken for magic. When they were children, their mothers had threatened them: "Be good or the nasty wizards will come and eat you up!" From their first teachers, they'd learned that the wizards had been cynical charlatans who coupled the skills of fairground magicians with an insatiable lust for power, who inspired the mad kings to greater and greater acts of tyranny and depravity.

Nobody believed that their magic had been real. Except, apparently, now, the greatest historian of the age. Who was probably gaga, but still… The Horn Lecture had suddenly become a lot more interesting.

"Doctor Tortua," Crabbe interrupted. "I really don't think…"

"A fascinating theory," said Basil helplessly. "But there's no way to prove it. The Council of Lords burned all the wizards' books and papers, and declared all mention of them outlaw."

"Aha!" Doctor Tortua's wizened face became almost frighteningly animated. "Aren't you forgetting something?" For a moment, Basil felt as if he were back in old Tortua's lecture hall, and the moment of truth was upon him. "The Book of the King's Wizard," the old man hissed. "A

complete book of spells, brought down from the North with Alcuin's wizard, Mezentian. Hollis mentions it, and so does Vespas."

Crabbe cleared his throat. "Trevor states categorically that it did not exist."

"Trevor," Basil St Cloud asserted crisply, "would have stated categorically that his mother did not exist if the Council told him to."

Crabbe smiled thinly. "There again, Doctor St Cloud, we disagree. Trevor's *Of Decadence and Deceit* is well-recognized as the most authoritative text on the subject of our country's sublime history."

"It hardly matters," Basil said irritably. "What is indisputable is that the nobles burned the wizards' books along with the wizards."

"But even with this fabled Book of the King's Wizard," Crabbe went on aggressively for the benefit of the crowd; "even if we had right here before us a page of ancient text instructing us in just how to turn straw into gold —" He paused for the laugh he knew he would get. "Even then, there is no proof of actual magic. The wizards may have been charlatans, but they were also clever politicians. By itself, a Book of the King's Wizard would prove only that they took care to persuade their royal masters of the reality of their charade."

St Cloud smiled coldly and said, "Very true, Crabbe. Another possibility is that the wizards believed themselves capable of true magic."

"Absurd!" bleated one of Crabbe's students.

"Pay attention," said Doctor Crabbe. "He's not saying they *were* magic; he's saying they *thought* they were magic. An original viewpoint, but not wholly unreasonable. Most of us believe that the magic they convinced others they performed was in fact mere trickery and legerdemain. But if, like our friend St Cloud here, you want to entertain the thought that the wizards themselves were victims of their own delusions…" He let a thin, pitying smile finish his sentence for him.

A young voice chimed in, "But if someone did find the Book of the King's Wizard and cast one of the spells from it and it really worked, wouldn't that clinch it?"

Basil recognized the voice of Peter Godwin, one of his own students, and wished, not for the first time, that youth were endowed with common sense as well as enthusiasm. Doctor Crabbe had a zealot's light in his shallow

golden eye, and his students were studying the hapless Godwin with predatory intent, like wolves studying a wounded hound.

"Godwin," said Basil. "Please consider what you have said. If an old book of wizards' spells were to turn up in someone's attic, say, or in a job-lot of mildewed rejects from some nobleman's library, there's no guarantee that it would be recognizable or even readable. Hollis speaks of a secret language, for instance, and Vespas writes of all public rituals being conducted in a kind of gibberish."

Godwin flushed to the roots of his curly brown hair.

"Even if you could read such a spell, it would prove nothing," Crabbe added. "If the spell had no effect, it could be argued that it was too subtle to be immediately apparent, or that only a wizard would have the training necessary to cast it successfully."

Doctor Tortua, who had to all appearances nodded off during this exchange, roused himself. "They were a disgrace, those wizards, no matter what else they were. All the same, it's a pity we'll never know."

"We certainly know that there is no such thing as magic," Crabbe said firmly.

"Oh, really?" Doctor Tortua looked at him keenly, a quick flash of the man Basil had loved. "And always have known, I suppose. And that would be why the Council of Lords outlawed all magic, eh? Because they didn't believe in it? One of those little conundrums of history: why pass a law against something that never existed? It's still on the books, you know: even saying that magic once existed is a civil offense. Forgot that, did you, Roger? I thought you were a scholar of modern history." He chuckled wickedly to himself. "Well, never mind. Good thing nobody ever pays any attention to what happens at University, or we'd all be in trouble, eh?"

NICHOLAS GALING HAD STUCK OUT THE LECTURE AS long as he could. Really, he thought, someone should have taken pity on the old fool and stopped him before he got started. Wizards and kings, indeed. It was mildly titillating to hear they'd been lovers back in the mists of time, but it shed no light on the Northern man who'd so upset the City Sessions. Ancient gossip wasn't modern politics. Wizards were bugabears to frighten naughty

children. If the University sheltered a royalist plot, poor, miserable, doddering Doctor Tortua certainly wasn't at the center of it.

WHEN THE MONARCHY FELL, THE NOBLES ABOLISHED nearly all of their particular titles. Everyone became a Lord, for to be styled a Lord of that free realm was felt to be honor and dignity enough. An exception was made for the three Ducal Houses: Hartsholt, Karleigh, and Tremontaine. For the great good they had done the country and the ancient lineage they bore, these dukes retained their titles, even though they no longer wore their coronets or took precedence in Council. The duchies did inherit seats on the Court of Honor and they retained the right to choose their own heirs from amongst their relations. The title usually passed conventionally to the eldest male; but there were exceptions. The present Duchess Tremontaine had inherited from her uncle, her mother's older brother, still remembered as the Mad Duke. He had no legitimate children, nor was he dead when he fled the city under a severe cloud, leaving his sixteen-year-old niece in charge of considerable estates with even more considerable income, as well as fistsful of manor houses, hunting lodges, and city property that included one of the nicest estates on the Hill.

Katherine was a practical girl, but she never could have done it if he had not also left her his manservant, a boy named Marcus, who had been in charge of keeping track of everything the Mad Duke could not, from estate revenues to his lovers' names. Very little unsettled Marcus, and he was happy to show the new Duchess Tremontaine the ropes.

Now, some forty years later, he was still her partner in the Tremontaine fortunes, and she still relied on him for friendship and advice. As the Duchess Katherine sat in her sunny study in Tremontaine House, reading a letter newly arrived from her cousin Jessica, she wondered what Marcus would make of it.

The letter had been written the previous spring. It was stained and crusted with sea salt. *Dear Katherine*, she read. *The funniest thing happened and I thought you would like to know about it. I picked up a man who said he was your first swordsmaster. He remembered both you and the old Duke very clearly. He was in a bad way, being surrounded by bandits in Fulati Pass and also down*

on his luck. We took care of it. I brought him on board with me and was able to drop him in Chartil, where the sword is still honored. He told some very amusing stories. I had no idea you had almost killed Lord whosis in your youth. Too bad.

"Katharine? You look like you've just bitten into a green plum."

It was Marcus, his hands full of papers.

"Jessica." The duchess waved the letter. "She says she met Venturus—my old teacher, remember?—out over the sea somewhere, rescued him from bandits. I wonder if she's telling the truth?"

He settled himself down on the windowseat. Middle age had thickened him, but his solidity was very much in keeping with his temperament, as though the outside man had finally caught up with the inside and was very comfortable there. "I don't see why not. It's not as though she goes to the trouble of writing very often. Is she trying to hit you up for anything?"

"Let me see." The duchess scanned the letter. "No. I don't think so. Just international gossip. Oh, wait—here's a bit about wool prices in Chartil…I knew that. When did she write this, last year? Hold on—oh, this is too silly, Marcus. It's wizards. Yes, indeed, a whole tribe of renegade wizards from hundreds of years ago who made their way east outremar, and established a school on a mountaintop…she ran into one in a marketplace somewhere in the Kyrillian Archipelago. She said he hailed her as—oh, this is too silly."

"Sounds like her." He grinned.

"*He spoke our language with a fearsome accent, and asked for news of home. You will think this is even sillier than I did*—Well, she's right there. *I told him we were all very well, thank you. He asked how the land prospered, without a king. I told him that we have a lovely duchess instead, who manages everything beautifully*—A compliment! There's a change!—*plus a few lords and chancellors to make up the balance.—And does not the land hunger for a king? I said it was years since I'd seen it.*

"*What do you think, madam duchess? Does it? And, if so, do you have a candidate? Let me know at once if a coronation is toward, for I would certainly drop everything to celebrate a king of your choosing.*" She folded the letter with an exasperated sigh. "Oh, Jessica."

"You'd think she'd have gotten over baiting you by now."

"I suppose I should be glad she writes at all. She can't be expecting an answer. But poor Venturus! Imagine him still being alive after all these

years! If it really is him, I should track him down and send him a pension. Ask Angela to step in here, will you? I'll draft the instructions."

chapter IV

THE DAY AFTER THE TORTUA LECTURE, LEONARD Rugg sat in the Blackbird's Nest, debating Placid's classic text *Of Manners and Morals* with Roger Crabbe. Placid had touched on both metaphysics and history, so it was an even playing field. Their students, who were standing by, ready to pick up the rhetorical ball as needed, understood that what was really being debated was Doctor Tortua's sanity and that Rugg was deliberately being provoking.

"Now, I'm no historian," Rugg was saying, "and correct me if I'm wrong, but Placid wrote *Of Manners* during the reign of Anselm the Wise, some two hundred years after the Union, isn't that so?" The historians nodded; the metaphysicians sniggered. "So when he says that wizards are, let me see, 'perfidious, pernicious and given to unholy appetites,' he's talking about the ones he knows, the ones in Anselm's court." Everyone nodded. "These wizards are men he knows, men he's observed, men he's probably eaten with. Maybe one stepped on his toe, or spilled soup on him! How, then, can we take his opinion of them seriously? He's biased. It's not history, it's not manners, and it's certainly not morals. I think we should simply delete the chapter and be done with it."

This sally was greeted by hissing and expostulations, but Crabbe's students fell silent when the little magister raised his hand. "Say what you

like about morality, Magister Rugg—and we all know that you are the expert there—" Sniggers, this time from Crabbe's historians. "But whose opinion can we trust, if not that of a man who was present at the time and wrote so eloquently about the decadent world he witnessed?"

"The world he witnessed was in essence the same world we live in today. 'Worlds do not change over time, nor the people in them,'" Rugg quoted sententiously.

Crabbe closed his eyes in weary disdain. "And it therefore follows that the study of history is a pointless exercise, I suppose?" He folded his arms across his chest and jerked his chin at the massive youth perched precariously on the end of the bench. "Blake, you answer him. You know my arguments, or you should."

The student he addressed nervously raked his sandy hair behind his ears, which were prominent and, just now, rather red. Justis Blake was a large, slow young man, with large, slow thoughts. He did not like to be hurried, nor did he have the smallest idea how Doctor Crabbe would answer such a statement. He had only been attending his classes for two weeks. But he licked his lips and tried anyway. "History teaches us that worlds do change. We don't have wizards now. That's a change."

The metaphysicians hooted at this statement of the obvious. Rugg said, "Yes, the nobles took care of that. They burned the old charlatans like so much cordwood, and there's an end to it. We still have nobles, though, don't we? Nothing really changes."

But Justis went on, "People don't change their basic natures, perhaps, but their surroundings can change the way they see things. For instance, a year ago I was still myself, but I lived on a farm—" Somebody mooed; it might even have been a historian.

"Honestly, Blake," Doctor Crabbe said. "If you can't reason logically, at least you could remember my lectures. Or quote Trevor's glorious words on the subject. You have read Trevor, haven't you?"

Blake's cheeks and ears burned. This was Doctor Crabbe's way, he reminded himself. He'd endured it in class and he'd survived it. The history magister's habit of leaping on you and shaking your ignorance out of you reminded him of his mother's terrier, hunting rats. Justis Blake had chosen to attend Crabbe's lectures because he thought it would be good for him to be shaken up a bit. Now he wasn't so sure.

Doctor Rugg turned a comradely smile on him. "Take heart, boy. Scholarly debates draw no real blood. Try again."

Blake took a deep breath. "Thank you, sir. All right. If the question is, what was the wizards' real function, and Placid can help elucidate it, then his opinion is as good as anyone's, isn't that so? Placid knew the kings, he knew the wizards. He didn't think much of their magic."

"What Placid thought about magic was very much what we still think," Rugg pointed out mildly. "'Magic is like strong drinke,'" he quoted; "'for the man who trusteth therein trusteth to the shadow and the image of power, that in itself is naught.' *Of Manners and Morals*. Book IV."

"Well, yes, but—" Justis swallowed. The whole room was looking at them. His mother had been so proud when he left to study in the city. He wondered what she would say when he appeared at her garden gate, cast out and utterly humiliated. He took a deep breath. "But we ought to look at other things besides Placid. It's like a stool, you see, that can't stand on one leg alone. Placid is one leg of the stool. He doesn't like wizards and he doesn't think much of their magic. Why isn't he afraid of them, though? Because he isn't, you can tell."

Crabbe's honey-colored eyes narrowed to little sharp points. "I had no idea what an original mind you had, Blake. Go on; I'm fascinated."

As well be hung for a wolf as for a lamb, Justis thought, and forged on. "He's more afraid of the king than of the wizards. Anselm curtailed their power. It's one reason he's called 'the Wise.' I think. Anyway, another leg of the stool is: Anselm enacted laws."

"Laws?" Crabbe sneered. "What do you know about laws, after two whole weeks studying history? Yesterday, you didn't know the names of the first Inner Council of Lords, and now you're an expert on Anselm's laws!"

"It was a monograph I found," Justis went on doggedly. "About some documents to do with laws enacted to limit the wizards' political role when Anselm came to the throne—"

"'Some documents'!" Crabbe threw up his hands. "There you have it! You turn your back on the great ones, on Fleming and the immortal Trevor, and go picking through moldy papers, and what happens?"

"You get some remarkable insights." The new voice came from over the heads of the ring of onlookers. Like rushes in the wind, everyone turned to face the speaker. He was a large, solid-looking man, with broad shoulders

and springy dark hair escaping from its ribbon. To Blake's country-bred eyes, there was something of the peasant about the way he stood, as if the Nest's uneven floor were a ploughed field. But his green sleeves proclaimed him a Doctor of Humane Sciences. "You learn what lies behind the formal statements approved by the court censors for publication, for one."

"Ah!" said Leonard Rugg happily, as though finding Basil St Cloud at his usual table at the Blackbird's Nest was the most unexpected of chances. "St Cloud! Going to set us all straight, are you?"

"If you like," Basil said mildly. "You, Rugg, of all people should admit that two-hundred-year-old gossip can still be valuable in evaluating historical data. Take the story about Placid dedicating *On Thought* to King Anselm. When Placid read the dedication out before the court, the king rewarded him with a purse of money and a writ of banishment."

Leonard Rugg blew what in a less distinguished personage would have been a raspberry of disgust. "Yes, yes, we all know that story—if it's true."

Crabbe chopped at the air impatiently. "Of course it's true, Rugg. Vespas reported it, and Trevor saw no reason to doubt the account."

While Crabbe and Rugg bickered, Justis Blake studied his rescuer. At a table by the window, Basil St Cloud stood surrounded by his students, the usual band of black-robed men of various shapes and sizes. But there was something about them all that reminded him of a team of kickball players from another village: they had the ball and they knew it. And right now their ball looked a lot more attractive than Rat-Catcher Crabbe's. On that impulse, Justis Blake did something very simple that would change the course of the rest of his life: he got up from the bench and made for the table by the window.

"Good idea," Crabbe called after him, unwilling not to fire a parting shot. "Maybe St Cloud can knock some basic history into your thick skull. When you've learned what atrocities the kings committed when they came South, then you may be able to understand why they had to be deposed, and their performing wizards along with them."

But Justis wasn't listening. St Cloud's black-robed throng closed ranks around him, shutting him off from Crabbe's table—and St Cloud invited him to explain himself. Smarting from Crabbe's needling, Justis was inclined to stammer at first, but Basil St Cloud's clear, intelligent eyes never left his face, and soon he was constructing the kind of argument that had inspired

his teacher in the village school to lend him book after book, and finally the means to make his way to the city and its university, where he'd been feeling like a prize fool ever since.

"So you see," Justis concluded, "our society grows out of his. We cannot understand what we are if we do not understand where we came from."

Basil St Cloud smiled, and Justis felt as if he'd just scored a difficult goal.

"I agree with you, Blake—it is Blake, isn't it?" Justis nodded. "What do you make of that story about Placid and Anselm, by the way?"

"Do you really want to know?" Justis was incredulous; Doctor Crabbe was seldom interested in what his students thought of the material he taught them.

"Yes," said Doctor St Cloud simply. "I do."

"Trevor says…"

"I know what Trevor says," St Cloud interrupted. "I want to hear what you think."

"It seems pretty obvious, sir. Anselm must have taken Placid's indictment of luxury and vice in *Of Manners and Morals* as a personal attack."

"Pretty obvious indeed. What if I were to tell you that Anselm banished the man because he found him a sententious bore?"

"I'd say that you were just guessing," Justis answered promptly. "There's nothing like that in any of the histories."

A man like a fence-post draped in black leaned over his shoulder and said truculently, "Careful. Someone might think you were calling Doctor St Cloud a liar."

"Let him be, Fremont. It's a fair point." St Cloud turned to Justis. "But consider: you yourself have noted that Anselm was instrumental in limiting the power of the wizards, so he certainly wasn't going to banish Placid for disliking them. Furthermore, papers do indeed turn up from time to time—in attics, in old chests, even in the University Archives." A slight young man whose long, fine hair was the color of copper laughed appreciatively and was rewarded with a smile. "In this case, it's a notation on the writ of banishment itself. I don't think it's been looked at since the Fall, but it's in the Archives. You can see it for yourself, if you're interested. In the margin, above the king's signature, there's a single word. *Ass!* It's the same hand as the signature."

"And he was, too," said the fence-post. "'A man who would live well must live wisely.'" He minced out the words savagely. "What does that *mean*, anyway?"

"That you should think before you speak, Fremont," said Doctor St Cloud repressively.

Justis shook his head. "If you don't mind my saying so, sir, that doesn't contradict what I said. *On Morals and Manners* was pretty hard on Anselm's whole court, after all, not just the wizards."

St Cloud looked at him so blankly that Justis began to wonder just how stupid he'd been, and then smiled slowly, like the sun rising over the Hill. "No more it does, Blake." He slapped the astonished young man on the shoulder. "Overlooking the obvious can be as dangerous as not looking beyond it. And you're not afraid to speak your mind. Good for you."

Justis grinned. It was good to feel intelligent again.

"Someone else's monograph doesn't constitute evidence," Fremont pointed out.

"Shut up, Henry." The speaker's voice was high and clear, like a girl's, but full of authority. A boy, no more than fourteen, with a fine suit of clothes under his black robe.

"It does if the author went to the original documents," St Cloud said. "Which he did. I know. He was one of my students."

Justis was inspired with a sudden and overwhelming desire to have the young magister say the same of him someday. "Doctor St Cloud," he said. "I…I'd like to attend your lectures formally, if you'll accept me."

St Cloud put his hand on Justis's shoulder. "I'm flattered, Master Blake, but I need to be sure you've thought this through. You've already begun with Doctor Crabbe, who is interested in the Fall of the Kings; I am interested in their rise. And our methods of study are as different as our fields."

"Yes, sir. I realize that. That's why I want—"

"I wasn't finished. I presume you are already studying some rhetoric, geography, and metaphysics?"

"Of course," Justis said.

"Good man. Then you will come to my lectures. You will think about history and why you wish to study it, and how. You will read Hollis's *Chronicle History of the Northern Kings*. It may read like a collection of fables,

but is the closest thing we have to a standard text on the pre-Union North. You will read Vespas, if you haven't already, and my own humble offering on the altar of scholarship, *The Origins of Peace*. You will attend lectures by Doctors Ferrule and Wilson, and weigh their ideas against mine. And at the end of—shall we say three weeks?—if you still find yourself yearning after kings and their doings, come to me and we'll see if something can be arranged."

Dazzled, Justis nodded. "Good man," said St Cloud, and squeezed his shoulder. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

He rose, threw some coppers on the table to pay the tally, smiled at the clustered students, and picked his way out through the tables and benches. He liked young Blake; a country boy with more imagination than discipline, but discipline could be learned.

By the fire, Basil's path was blocked. A student with a long tail of sleek, burnished hair occupied a chair, his legs sprawled luxuriously out toward the hearth, taking up more than his share of room in the crowded tavern. His arms were folded over his chest and his eyes were closed, giving him the look of some beautiful young warrior of old, struck down in his prime and carved on a tombstone. As Basil's shadow came between him and the fire, he looked up and smiled an indolent smile.

He looked familiar, but Basil could not place him. The magister continued to stare until the young man sat up and pulled in his legs to clear the path. He did not apologize, and Basil did not thank him.

Basil's students watched their magister go, almost reverently silent; then someone shouted to the barman for more beer, and the redhead Lindley turned to Justis.

"Well," he said acidly, "*you* certainly made an impression."

It took Justis a moment to frame a response. The country was different from the city, with different rules of conduct. At home, he'd have fought anyone who'd baited him, and bought him a beer after. But he didn't want to fight Lindley, who was half his size, and all too obviously hopelessly in love with the young magister. "My mother always told me I should be seen and not heard," Justis said peaceably. "I wish I'd listened to her. I felt like a prize calf on market day."

The redhead hesitated, then smiled more naturally. His eyes were a dense pastel blue, like dyed velvet. "I was thinking you looked rather like a

prize calf myself, but I won't say so now," he said. "I'm Anthony Lindley, of History. That rudesby with the needle nose is Henry Fremont. The infant in the gaudy coat is Peter Godwin, and the stalwart gentleman to your left is Benedict Vandeleur. We've been studying with St Cloud for two years now, and consider ourselves his chief disciples."

Justis shook Lindley's hand and acknowledged his introductions with a nod. "Justis Blake, of heaven knows what, unless Doctor St Cloud takes me on. Some days, I think I'm getting the hang of it. Some days, I've got cowflops between my ears. Like today."

Everyone looked at Benedict Vandeleur, who fixed the newcomer with a measuring eye. If every dog-pack has its leader, Vandeleur was clearly top dog here. A city man's son, perhaps, twenty or a bit over, well-muscled, with a stubbly jaw, deep-set eyes, and coarse, dark hair bound back in a thin strip of linen. Him, Justis could have fought, but he smiled at him instead, frank and unthreatening.

There was a charged pause, and then Vandeleur nodded. "Crabbe's a thug," he said.

Taking this as a provisional acceptance, Justis recklessly ordered a round of beer for his prospective colleagues. The gesture no less than the beer loosened their tongues, and soon Justis knew that Peter Godwin was a nobleman's son but nobody cared; that Henry Fremont liked insulting people but nobody cared; and that Anthony Lindley could be perfectly sensible when he wanted. He also knew that, as far as this particular group of historians was concerned, Roger Crabbe was a lick-boot toady who had insinuated himself into old Tortua's good graces and Ferrule and Wilson were idiots who hadn't had a new idea since they'd traded their mothers' breasts for tankards.

"Yes, yes, I believe you," said Justis, "but Doctor St Cloud said to go hear them, so I will. One can learn something even from the barking of dogs, as my mother used to say."

Vandeleur laughed. "You'll do," he said. "Tell you what. Come by my rooms later, and I'll show you my notes."

"Done," said Justis. "I'll bring a pie, shall I?"

"Oh, a rich man," sneered Fremont. "Bring a bottle, too, and I'll lend you my copy of Hollis."

"Oh, a rich man," said Justis, in perfect imitation, earning himself a rap over the head from Fremont. He hadn't been so happy since he first came to University. To the Seven Hells with the rigors of Crabbe. Doctor St Cloud's disciples knew how to enjoy themselves.

chapter V

IF THERE WAS ONE THING BASIL ST CLOUD LOVED more than digging out long-forgotten knowledge, it was presenting that knowledge to his students. Years of rooting around in the University Archives had turned up treasures: royal proclamations, letters from decades of Councils to decades of kings, paymasters' rolls for royal households, lists of King's Companions, drafts of laws and treaties, signed and unsigned. These documents revealed a world that was far more interesting, more brightly colored, more real than the stately abstractions of the historians Trevor and Fleming, White and even Tortua. Basil remembered the almost sexual thrill he'd felt on first handling Anselm's letters to the Dragon Chancellor and seeing the sweeping, confident signature above the royal seal. It was that more than anything else which had ignited his fascination with the mysteries surrounding the kings of the North and their descendants.

Of course Basil was perfectly acquainted with all the standard texts, or he never would have been made a Doctor of History. But where his fellow historians were content to rehash the writings of their revered predecessors, turning argument and analysis on increasingly tiny points of interpretation and shading, Basil was quietly reaching into whole new

sources—some of them very old indeed. He mined ballads and ancient legends for the grains of truth they might hold; and where most historians relied on, say, Vespas's summary of the Ophidian Treaty in *The Book of Kings*, Basil had been known to appear at a lecture brandishing the actual document like a banner, its red seal dark with the blood of ages, captured like a prize from the University Archives.

The small, drafty hall known as LeClerc where Basil St Cloud delivered his lectures was tucked away behind a stone wall and a small, cobbled courtyard, not easy to find. After the Tortua debacle, though, the early kings and their wizards were a hot topic, and this morning LeClerc was as full as a tavern at festival-time. Basil looked out over a floor packed with black gowns and eager young faces. More students perched along the gallery like untidy crows, elbowing one another and whispering and eating steamed buns.

It was an audience Basil could not resist. They'd come to hear scandal; well, he'd give them scandal. As it happened, he'd come across a particularly juicy morsel just yesterday.

"A treat for you today," Basil said. "I'm going to skip over some three hundred years of councils and treaties and legislative acts, and talk about the reign of the last king but one, Mad Hilary, also called Hilary the Stag."

He began dryly enough, with material drawn from Doctor Tortua's *Hubris*, for the benefit, he said kindly, of any visitors who might not be familiar with the basic texts. But soon he was filling out the long-agreed-upon events of Hilary's reign with the details he'd found in the hitherto lost memoirs of Hieronymus, Duke Karleigh, who had represented the Council of Nobles in Hilary's court.

"Shortly after his coronation, Hilary began to show signs of the peculiar delusion that earned Kim his name. He spent more and more time in the compound where the royal deer were raised, and interested himself in their care and nurture to the length of feeding a young fawn pap and milk with his own hands, and bringing it into the palace to sleep in his own bedchamber. When Queen Amelia objected, he had her moved into another part of the palace."

Laughter in the gallery, quickly shushed. Rows of dark and light heads bent over tablets with a small scratching of pencils, like hens after worms.

"It came as a considerable surprise to his court, therefore, when Hilary chose to revive the ritual, abandoned back in his great-grandfather's time, of hunting a yearling buck and sacrificing it to the land. Hilary insisted upon hunting the deer himself and bringing it to the wizards and participating in the sacrifice, even though the ritual so disturbed him that he kept to his chamber for days after. The court wizards adored Hilary, even though almost no one else did."

A movement caught his eye: a head shaking, as if in amused wonder. He focused on it to see slanting cheekbones, a long, fine jaw—faintly familiar, but unplaceable. Distracted, St Cloud paused to gather his thoughts.

Ah. He had it now. The young man from Doctor Tortua's lecture, and from the tavern yesterday. The young man who had smiled at him then, who was smiling at him now. Basil hurriedly returned his full attention to King Hilary and his peculiarities. Which, in his later years, centered increasingly on beautiful young lovers of no birth and little common sense, who seldom had a choice in the matter. One of them had cut his throat for him. Hilary had been naked at the time, save for a fine deerskin. The young murderer had been discovered weeping over the corpse, his monarch's blood smeared over his face and chest.

"The court wizards questioned him, of course," Basil said, "but they could get nothing out of him save the babblings of madness: first he accused the king, and then the wizards themselves, of commanding him to do the deed. He died under the questioning, much irritating Hilary's heir Gerard, who had been looking forward to executing the traitor. Not to be cheated of his revenge, King Gerard commanded that the murderer's corpse be drawn, quartered, and burned just as if it had been alive. Gerard was a great believer in following ritual. The problem was that many of the rituals of the North were remnants of a harsher, more barbaric time, when the wizards had been a great deal more involved in government. Tomorrow, I will explain just what all this has to do with the kings of the early Union. Unless, of course, you can work it out for yourselves."

The University bell tolled heavily over his last words, and there was a general rustle and scuffle as the students gathered up their effects. They'd always known the last kings were corrupt and mad: it was the foundation of every lecture on the monarchy they'd ever heard. But even Crabbe, who

was accounted a good lecturer, never really made *corrupt* and *mad* as real as St Cloud's account of Hilary's death.

"Thank you." It was the strange young man, standing below the lectern. "That was interesting, about King Hilary and his lover. All those details, about the slit throat and the deerskin on the bed, they aren't in Tortua or Trevor, or even Vespas. But I know I've seen something like it, something very like it, and I'm trying to remember where…"

Something about him—his voice, perhaps, or his arrogance, or his suggestion that St Cloud's discovery was not as astonishing as he'd thought—put Basil's back up. "Indeed?" he said. "When you remember where, you must certainly let me know. Independent corroboration is always important."

"In case someone thinks you made it all up," the young man agreed.

St Cloud considered ignoring this, but could not. "Will you hear some advice, Master…?"

"Campion." The young man swept a courtly bow. "Theron Campion."

"Master Campion. A scholar's facts are a scholar's honor. I was not made a Doctor of this University for inventing colorful details."

"Of course not, Doctor St Cloud." Campion's glance flicked up mischievously. "But…how charming of you if you had!"

His eyes were greenish. Basil found that he was looking into them. Theron Campion smiled engagingly, and Basil felt his heart begin to hammer with what, under the circumstances, could only be outrage. "Truth is hardly a jesting matter," he said coldly.

A moment later, the young man and his disturbing eyes were pushed aside by a group of students wanting to carry Doctor St Cloud off to the Blackbird's Nest for a drink and more stories. They were disappointed, but not entirely surprised, when he laughingly informed them that being a magister did not absolve him from the exercise of scholarship.

"If I'm to be as immortal as Trevor and Fleming are, as Doctor Tortua will be, I need to write a text as great as theirs. Such texts are not written in taverns, my friends, not even taverns as stimulating as the Blackbird's Nest."

ALL THE GREAT HISTORIANS HAD MADE THEIR reputations on a single defining work. Tortua, for instance, had written a study of the Inner Council and endless monographs on various pre-Fall laws and treaties, but *Hubris and the Fall of the Kings* was the thing he would be remembered for, just as Trevor was remembered for *Of Decadence and Deceit* and Fleming for *The Tragedy of Kingship*.

Basil St Cloud doubted that he would be remembered for *The Origins of Peace*. He considered it a journeyman work, competent but not inspired. The book focused entirely on the nobles' activities around the Union. It was little more than a paean to the Council of Nobles for forging an alliance that would bring peace and prosperity to both kingdoms and put an end to the interminable border wars that harvested too many lives and not enough food. What finally brought them together was an invasion that threatened both kingdoms; what had kept them together was the marriage of the monarchs. He'd used only established sources, and had come to the unexceptionable conclusion that the barbaric North had gained more from the Union than the civilized South.

Basil had written *Origins* to suit the Doctors and Governors, before he'd discovered the heady joys of true scholarship. And before he'd realized the truth about the ancient kings.

For too many years, that truth had been buried; buried not only by courtiers and scholars eager to please their noble masters, but by the genuinely despicable behavior of the kings immediately preceding Gerard, who had quite rightly been deposed by the Council of Lords. It had been nearly two hundred years since the last king was slain; now, Basil thought, might be time to uncover the truths about the first ones, who ruled the land for hundreds of years: strong and beautiful warriors who had united the two kingdoms against foreign invaders despite the bickering of Northern and Southern partisans; men of daring and imagination who had left their mark on treaties and laws still in place, on stable borders and prosperous farms.

It was a truth that would be hard for anyone now living to accept. The assumption was that all the kings had been more or less as mad as Hilary, as wicked as Gerard. But Basil had read their very words, had touched the paper that they had touched, breathed the dust of their official documents and private correspondence, and Basil knew better. There was nothing of

madness in Anselm's letters to his councilors, no wickedness in the love poetry Roland the Stout wrote to his wife, Queen Isabelle, or in the clever sketches Orlando the Fair had scribbled in the margins of the draft of the Arkenvelt Treaty. For generations after the Union, the kings had ruled fairly and well, presiding over courts in which scholars and statesmen practiced their crafts, and young men danced, fenced, debated, jousted, dallied with the daughters of nobles and with each other. And before that, the Northern kings had kept their rocky little kingdom independent and prosperous against the twin threats of foreign invasion and famine. Basil loved the ancient kings. He loved them for their mystery, for their bright courage, for the love and poetry and art that they had inspired. He loved them because nobody else did, and because loving them seemed to be the same as loving buried truth. He loved them, and wanted justice for them.

The problem, of course, was evidence. Charming as he found Hollis's *Chronicle History of the Northern Kingdom*, Basil understood it to be a piece of political puffery, commissioned by Alcuin the Diplomat and his queen to introduce the history of the king's ancient land to their new subjects. Their descendants were better documented; but in his heart Basil knew that the key to it all lay in Alcuin's predecessors in the North, in what they had brought to the Union and how it had worked its way into this land's living heritage. The ancient North kingdom had yielded precious few written texts, and those that survived were so fragmentary as to be almost incomprehensible. Basil believed the history of the North lay encoded in ballads and poetic fragments, in legends of skin-changers and wizards and tales of glorious battles and hopeless loves—but that was not the kind of evidence even the most liberal-minded of historians would accept as authoritative.

The Treaty of Union, however, was a document whose historical authority even Roger Crabbe could not question. And an astute scholar could deduce a great deal about the laws and customs of the mysterious northlands from the provisions of that treaty. Inheritance, for example. Why should a whole section of the treaty be devoted to ensuring that the throne never pass to a woman? It set the queen's nobles against the king from the beginning, flying in the face of their own traditions. What did the kings and their wizards have against women, and in whose interest was such a law? What tradition did it spring from?

In pursuit of answers, Basil devoted himself to sifting through the stacks of books and papers he found in the Archives, or bought from the rag-and-bone men who made their living combing through the city's trash. Among the useless bills and tallies and notes, occasionally he discovered historical gold: letters from an ancient Lord Davenant to his son, or a half-filled book of private musings by a Lord Montague in the reign of King Alcuin's great-great-grandson Rufus. He'd found that one in a box of old romances and household accounts belonging to an impoverished Karleigh cousin, which had also contained the diary of old Hieronymus where he'd read the remarkable story of Hilary's death.

Basil was annoyed, but not surprised, to find the wizards mentioned everywhere. Davenant urged his son to seek their help with his wife's infertility. Montague cursed them for interfering in a drainage scheme before he'd told anyone about it. Montague also quoted a certain Pretorius, who "performed a ritual of Sweet Water over the well at Hemmynge House. No more sickness there, the Land be thanked. But like the shepherd in the tale, now the King desires the river purified, and P. doubts the whole College of Wizards would have sufficient power for that monstrous task, and is much given to crying, 'Alas for the days of Guidry!'"

At least, it looked like *Guidry*. There was a Guidry's Well up north. But Basil supposed it could have been *Cully*. Or even *Godfrey*. Montague's handwriting was scratchy and faded, but he was close to the king, and every sentence was precious.

Basil kept at the notebook until his ink ran low and the fading light reminded him that he was out of candles. Whereupon he noticed that his head also ached, his mouth was as dry as the Twelve-Months' Drought, and his belly was as empty as his inkwell. Beer was what he needed, and some food, and more ink, and probably firewood and candles as well. Which meant that he was going to have to go out.

He swore, and put on his hat. If he had a servant, he wouldn't have to interrupt his work for trifles. But a servant's yearly hire was a half-dozen new books, a winter's worth of wood. He simply could not afford it.

Basil blew out his candle and locked his door behind him. The Horn Chair of History paid a good stipend, he thought as he felt his way down the stairs. It would cover not only a manservant, but new rooms and bookshelves and wax candles and all the books he needed. His chances of

capturing that prize were small, though; when Tortua stepped down, the Chair would inevitably go to an established historian, not a jumped-up country boy with a minor book and a couple of mildly controversial monographs to his credit. It was foolish to think otherwise, wasn't it?

In the dank front hall, the scruffy boy who kept the door let him out. The evening was clear but cold. Shivering, Basil made for the nearest tavern, the Ink Pot, traditional gathering-place of poets and rhetoricians. Disinclined to company, he found an empty table by the wall and ordered burned ale and a fowl pie. The ale appeared almost immediately; Basil watched over the edge of his tankard as a hilarious group of students by the fire argued some fine point of rhetoric. One boy had his foot up on a bench, lunging like a swordsman with an accusing finger to his laughing opponent's nose. Only eight years ago, he'd still been one of them. He sipped the fragrant brew and smiled to himself. And now he was dreaming of the Horn Chair. Still, why shouldn't he dream? Because, he answered himself, he was not even thirty yet; an infant among magisters. Yet who were his rivals, after all? Ancient history was not a popular subject, and Doctors of History were few. Only Crabbe posed any real competition—but Crabbe had many enemies. As far as Basil knew, his only enemy was Crabbe himself.

The fowl pie came; he ate it and was contemplating more ale when a black-gowned student detached himself from the group by the fire and headed toward Basil's corner.

"Doctor St Cloud," said the young man brightly. "Good evening."

This time, Basil recognized him immediately. "Campion, isn't it?"

"May I sit down?" The green eyes were a little glassy with drink, the white hand heavy on the table's edge.

Basil saw no reason why he should mince words with a man who was, after all, both drunk and rude. "No," he said flatly.

Theron Campion staggered, catching himself against Basil's shoulder. "Oops," he said. "Sorry. Just sit here quietly. You won't know I'm here." He eased himself onto the bench next to Basil, thigh to thigh. Basil recoiled as though the touch had burned him.

"Sorry," said Campion again, and moved away.

"Don't you think you should go home while you can still walk?" Basil asked coldly.

"I'm not so drunk as all that," said Campion. "I can still say 'Seven seditious swordsmen sailed in exile to Sardinopolis.' Shall I buy you a drink? The wine's not so bad here, if you know what to ask for." He smiled like a cat who knows where the cream is kept. "I know what to ask for."

Basil laughed. "I'm sure you do. No, you shall not buy me wine."

"Brandy, what about brandy? Or beer. Men who drink beer are seldom beautiful, but it's the exception proves the rule, or so 'Long John' Tipton would have us believe."

"'Long John'?" Basil said, ignoring the reference to beauty. "Is that how you refer to Doctor Tipton? What do you call *me*, then?"

The boy smiled a very creamy smile. "Now, that would be telling. I would call you Basil, if you would permit it."

Basil eyed Campion with the fascinated curiosity of someone watching a man walking blindly into a brick wall. The boy was clearly too drunk to know what he was doing. "I can't stop you," he said shortly.

"Oh, yes, you can. One hard look from your eyes could turn my tongue to stone. Everyone is afraid of you."

"You exaggerate."

"I do not, sir. I always pay ver-ry par*ti*cular attention when you speak." An aristocratic drawl was beginning to bleed through the University sharpness. "Though, mostly, I watch your mouth. It is austere, yet sensuous. It bears watching."

Basil repressed an urge to cover his mouth with his hand. "I wasn't aware that you had had much opportunity to watch it before today. You are hardly a regular attendee of my lectures."

"It's a morning lecture," Campion explained apologetically. "I have come before, though. I heard you speak on the rise of the Inner Council and the court wizards. You're wrong about the wizards, you know." He leaned closer. "I understand about them, you see, because I have studied the *rhetoric* of the situation. Being a student of Rhetoric. Which I am—this year. Last year I did Geography…but never mind. I like History, too. What I'm trying to say is," he sat up straight and drew a deep breath: "What were the court wizards? What was their function, after all? They were counselors to the kings. They gave advice. All this business we read in Hollis about their seeing into men's hearts, binding the kings with chains of gold…it's figurative language. A rhetorical device. Any poet can tell you that. What

they really were…they were like you, Basil: they sifted the evidence, looking for truth. They were scholars of the heart." Pleased, he repeated it: "Scholars of the heart. And because they were good scholars, they got it right often enough to be credible and thus gain a reputation for real magic."

The boy spoke earnestly, leaning close enough for Basil to smell the brandy on his breath. In the candlelight, his eyes seemed huge, and green as forest leaves. He waited for a response, and when none was forthcoming, sat back on the bench with a complacent smile. "I knew you'd agree, once I'd demonstrated it to you," he said.

Basil recoiled. "Agree? Master Campion, the only thing you've demonstrated is your ability to spin theories out of thin air. There's not a single fact in that whole farrago of nonsense—not one."

Unrepentant, Campion said, "But we know so few facts about those days, and those few we know are so unreliable. Are you suggesting—*-you*, Doctor St Cloud—that I…let me see now…*set about inventing colorful details?*"

Basil gritted his teeth. "I am suggesting that you trouble to inform yourself before you start formulating theories."

"I know as much as most of your students do. I've read Tortua and Hollis, and one of the others—Delgardie, that's the one. What else is there?"

A student reeled past them, or nearly—at the last moment he did a drunken bounce off the table and into Campion's lap, "Bugger off, Hemmynge." Campion dumped him on the ground. Hemmynge wandered off in the other direction, with people shouting after him.

"What else?" Campion persisted. "If I want facts."

"I provide those at my lectures, young man. For a fee."

Campion groaned. "There are a lot of things I'm better at than getting up in the morning. And you won't let me buy you a drink. Tell me now."

"We can't talk here," Basil said. "It's too noisy."

"Out on the street, then?"

"Too cold."

"I don't suppose your rooms are nearby…?"

BASIL ST CLOUD'S ROOMS WERE UP FOUR FLIGHTS OF stairs in an old stone building that had originally been part of the royal dependencies. Some time after the fall of the kings, it had been cut up into a warren of more or less cramped apartments. Basil's was a largish room, furnished with a wooden bedstead, a table and a chair, and scores of books and papers piled and drifted on the floor, against the walls, in the corners, and spread out on the mattress like an eager lover.

"The scholar's mistress," observed Campion, folding his body down onto the bed. He laid his hand on one closely written sheet. "Is this your new book?"

On the way from the Ink Pot, Basil had had time to regret his impulsiveness. "No," he said coldly.

"*Do* you have a mistress?"

Basil, who was poking up the fire, jerked upright, his lips compressed. The young man returned his look gravely, like a curious child. He'd loosed his shirt at the neck, laying open the fine linen to bare the hollow of his throat, which was also fine, and very pale. Firelight polished the fold of hair over his shoulder and touched the high curves of his brow and his aquiline nose with a warm light, lending them the look of alabaster or carved ivory. His eyes, shadowed, were blank.

Basil's world spun once and realigned itself around a figure descended from the marble frieze above the Great Hall, now sitting on his bed: the living image of an ancient king.

Theron Campion moved two books onto the floor, clearing a larger space on the bed. The movement broke the illusion, but not the enchantment. Basil took one step toward the bed, and then another, his hand held out in unconscious supplication. Theron grasped it and pulled him down into a long kiss that ended with his lying back on the bed amid the papers.

"Watch out," Theron murmured against Basil's mouth. "She has nails!"

"*What?*"

"Your mistress. She's scratching my back. And this can't be doing her any good. Let's get rid of her."

Basil propped himself up on his elbow and leaned over Theron to scoop papers and books off the end of the bed, lifting him to get at the papers he was lying on, pressing against his belly, working his hands under the gown,

the jacket, the tight waistcoat, the shirt, to the strong, smooth back beneath. The young man's flesh was warm and supple under Basil's hands; his mouth was sweet and firm under Basil's lips. Theron rolled him away, laughing, and helped him disentangle himself from his scholar's robe and the suit of clothes beneath it.

Then Theron pulled his own shirt over his head. His skin was a little flushed, and winding up his chest to his throat was a tracery of leaves so beautifully etched that it might almost have grown there of itself, like ivy on a stone wall. The ivy leaves were intertwined with oak. Basil lifted his hand to touch the decoration and hesitated, overcome.

Theron glanced down at himself, his expression closed. "It won't smudge," he said.

"I'd like to see the rest of it," said Basil unsteadily.

The leaves coiled around Theron's waist to end under one high, round buttock. Basil stroked it, half-expecting to feel leaves rustling under his fingers. Theron gasped and burrowed his hand into the dark hair of Basil's chest. His fingers were cold. "I've always wanted a fur coverlet," he said. "Come and warm me."

And Basil did warm him, until they threw the blankets on the floor, until they flared and leapt and burned themselves out to lie at last in a smoldering glow of satisfaction.

"I'm curious about something," Basil said sleepily. "Have you been following me? Lately, I seem to see you everywhere."

The young man settled himself more comfortably against his shoulder. "I thought you'd never notice."

"I noticed you at once!"

Basil felt the smile against his skin. "No, you didn't. I attended lectures; I saw you in the Nest surrounded by your students, your particular followers —"

Basil chuckled.

"What?"

"The way you say that. Par-*tic*-u-lar. You sound as though you're picking up something tiny with silver tweezers. Never mind. Go on."

The student shifted. "Well…I studied you until I knew you, or at least the public parts of you: your learning, your passion, the way your voice slows when you answer a question. I studied your hands, and wondered how

they'd touch me; your hair, and how it would smell. I wondered about all that, and about the rest of you I could not see. I wanted to know you. And I wanted you to know me. I wanted you to see me."

"Have you gotten what you wanted?"

Theron trailed his hand down Basil's breastbone to his belly. "Yes," he said. "I have."

AFTER THERON HAD LEFT HIM, BASIL BANKED THE fire, threw his gown over the bed, and crawled between icy sheets that had so recently been more than warm enough. He had no idea how late it was—he wouldn't have heard the University Clock bell tonight if it had rung directly in his ear. But as they lay together, half-dozing, Theron had suddenly said, "I have to go home tonight, you know. Sophia worries when I don't come home at all."

A small serpent of jealousy stirred in Basil's breast. "Sophia?"

"Lady Sophia Campion. My mother."

Campion, Campion…An old family, but fairly minor in the great scheme of things. Basil knew plenty of dead ones. There was a Bertram Campion who had seen King Tybald slain at Pommerey; a Raymond Campion who had written a monograph on ancient campaign maps. But what the Campions had done lately, he had no idea. He'd have to ask someone, discreetly.

The serpent stilled, Basil had helped the young man disentangle his shirt and breeches from the bedclothes, watched him dress, and kissed him in parting. "Tomorrow," Theron murmured against his mouth. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Basil blew out his candle and smiled into the darkness. They hadn't talked about history after all, or much else, for that matter. Tomorrow, Theron had said. There would be time to talk about many things tomorrow. And perhaps for day upon day after that.

chapter VI

LONG BEFORE THE KINGS RODE SOUTH, EVEN before the Southern lords had claimed their noble titles—before, in fact, the city was anything but a collection of huts and fishing boats, its inhabitants were concentrated on a tiny island in the midst of the river. When they expanded to the eastern bank, they built a cathedral, and a fort to defend the river, and a school that would grow into a University, and a Hall of Princes and a palace and all the outbuildings that government demands.

The Hall of Princes became the nobles' Council Chamber, the Fort a prison for important people, and the University burst its walls to take over the government buildings; but people went on living on the little island, known as Riverside. Of course, as the rest of the city grew, Riverside came down in the world. Steep-roofed old townhouses still lined its narrow streets, but bits of their elaborate stonework had given way to the elements and bits had been stolen to replace other bits. When Theron's father first lived there, Riverside was the haunt of thieves and swordsmen and worse. In these latter days they had not altogether abandoned the district, but now the pimps and pickpockets shared the crumbling buildings with poets and musicians and artists waiting to be discovered where the rent was cheap.

Lying between two banks of the river, Riverside was still an in-between sort of place, too full of poor people to be grand, but too well-loved by its various inhabitants to be truly degraded. It boasted a sort of ramshackle palace built (by Theron's father) of old houses strung together, which sheltered a number of dependents and an infirmary run by Theron's mother. Things had a habit of changing quickly in Riverside: people's fortunes, their lives, their expectations. And the buildings witnessed it all, unmoved. In Riverside the past slept, but it slept lightly.

BETWEEN WAKING AND SLEEPING, A YOUNG MAN LAY dreaming in his high, curtained bed. He dreamed that his hands and feet were bound, and that a dark figure was standing over him. He smelt wood smoke and musk, and thought, "I have dreamed all this many times. But this time, it is not a dream, and I will have to—" But he could not remember what was to happen next.

The dark figure came closer, choking him with its animal smell. "Think, Little King," it said, and Theron drew a deep breath and choked and cried out and woke up.

He lay in the darkness of his curtained bed, soaked with sweat, his heart pounding. It was the King Dream again, returned to plague him. It had been years: not since he was a child, and had run crying to his mother night after night, wailing, "The King Man! The King Man, Mama!" Sophia had tucked him in, and sung him songs from her native land, about a goat and a little boy on a bright hillside…Well, he could hardly run to her now. But he could untangle himself from the knot of sheets, and pull back the curtains and see if it were day yet, or still night. And if it were day, he could ring for his valet to bring him something for the headache he realized he had, something to take away the metallic ghost of brandy haunting the back of his throat. There was no help tor dreams, but Terence knew all about curing hangovers.

Theron struggled upright and tugged the curtains aside, letting in a cheerful glow from a newly made-up fire. His conscience clear, he rang the bell.

Theron's bedchamber was in the oldest of the ancient mansions his father had cobbled together to make Riverside House. None of the doors fit properly, the floors slanted, and the windows filtered the light through thick, green glass that transformed the brightest sunshine into an underwater murk. Theron loved it. His room boasted such charms as carved paneling and little steps up to the deep, shuttered windows. Best of all, the room was at the top of a stair that led to an outside door, so that no one need be bothered by late-night comings and goings.

A soft knock at the door heralded Terence, carrying a covered cup on a tray. He shook his head when he saw his master, but said nothing except,

"We're nearly out of this particular tisane, sir. And you asked me to remind you that you're to dine on the Hill tonight. The blue velvet is clean and brushed, but if you'd prefer the russet, tell me now so I can sponge the stain."

Theron sipped the tisane, fragrant with licorice and chamomile, and sighed as its warmth soothed away his headache and the last of the dream. "The blue will do just fine, Terence, thank you. Is my mother in?"

"As to that, sir, I cannot say for certain." Terence picked Theron's breeches from the floor and smoothed them over his arm. "Cook was making an omelet when I went for the tisane, sir," he admitted; "I'd venture to say that Lady Sophia is at breakfast."

Theron flung back the rumpled bedclothes and slid from the bed, shrugging himself into his dressing-gown. "Never mind my hair, Terence, just give me a ribbon. I don't want to find the breakfast-room occupied only by dirty plates."

A few minutes later, Theron was striding down an uncarpeted flight of stairs and into a long, white-plastered hall that led to the breakfast-room, where his mother sat frowning over a folio volume propped against a porridge-bowl.

Lady Sophia Campion would have laughed to hear herself described as a formidable woman, but it was true nevertheless. She'd been born on the distant island of Kyros, and her dark eyes and olive skin marked her out as a foreigner no less than her slight accent and her habit of saying precisely what she thought. She always wore black—in mourning for Theron's father, she said, the love of her life, who had died twenty years ago, two months before the birth of his only son. Privately, Theron thought she continued to wear black because it was a practical color for a woman who never knew when she might be called upon to stitch a wound or deliver a baby.

"You're up early, my dear," she said without looking up from her book. "The toast is burnt, but the porridge is warm and the milk quite fresh."

He came around the table to kiss her cheek, caught sight of an illustration of a human belly cut open, with all the guts colored a garish pink, and averted his eyes.

"Good morning, Mama."

She looked at him narrowly. Conscious of his unshaven cheeks and heavy eyes, Theron sat with his back to the window and busied himself

with chocolate and grater, sugar and milk and whisk and cup. "What are you reading?" he asked.

"Tanner on surgery," she answered. "You'd better go back to bed when you've breakfasted if you intend to dine at Katherine's tonight."

"Nothing I'd like better. But Doctor Tipton's lecturing on Divisions and Definitions this morning. And there's a friend I've promised to see in the afternoon."

Lady Sophia sighed. Attending a two days' labor did not make her feel her age as much as dealing with her only son these days. He'd always been susceptible, going at love as if it were a parlor game to be played with as many different partners as possible. Well, he was young, and it was only right that a young man be allowed his freedom. She had certainly taught him everything he needed to know about preventing unhappy accidents of the flesh. So his love affairs had never caused her much anxiety until he'd fallen into the web of that spider disguised as a woman, that Ysaud.

Lady Sophia turned the page with a vicious snap. In the months since Ysaud had tired of him, Theron was much improved. At first he had sulked in Riverside House, hiding from the inevitable gossip that swirled outside. Slowly he had ventured out to his classes, to Riverside's musical taverns and to family parties, and finally back to the Hill's society balls, where his absence had been noticed. But he still seemed perpetually tired, as though the effort of being around other people was draining him. And as far as she knew, he always came home at night, alone. She was annoyed with him and worried in equal measure; but he wasn't a child anymore, to be scolded or coaxed or lectured into reasonable behavior. All she could do was to love him, and wait for experience to teach him a little sense.

"You don't get enough rest," she said mildly.

"Now you sound like a mother." He lifted the chocolate to his lips and blew upon it to make little creamy ripples chase one another across the dark surface.

"I sound like a physician," Sophia corrected. "A mother would worry about your heart as well as your health."

Theron smiled into his chocolate. "My heart is very well, Mama."

Her eye still on Tanner, Sophia missed the smile. "It would be worse even than breaking your heart, if Ysaud should have frozen it." She glanced up at her son, who looked peeved. "Yes, I know you will not speak of it.

Your father was the same. I do not understand it. Every physician knows that a wound must be searched if it's to heal cleanly."

She paused hopefully. Theron, avoiding her gaze, picked a piece of leathery toast from the rack and buttered it. Sophia sighed and changed the subject. "I've a demonstration this afternoon—a simple goiter for the first-year surgeons. Would you like to attend?"

Theron said, "I fear that watching you cut into some poor old man's goiter no longer counts as a high treat for me." She stiffened slightly, and he looked contrite. "I'm sorry, Mama. That was badly put."

"It was. But if you behave as a child, it is that I treat you as one." As always when she was upset, Sophia's grammar strayed toward the forms of her native tongue. "Well, it is no matter. I will demonstrate the excision of a goiter and you will see your friend, and we shall meet at Tremontaine House in the evening." She looked him sternly in the eye. "Shall we not?"

"We shall, Mama. And I further promise to be there in good time, so that Cousin Katharine may have ample opportunity to tell me what a fribble I am before the other guests come and family loyalty forces her to hold her tongue."

Sophia shut Tanner. "As you wish," she said gently, and rising, gathered up the book and went to the door. She was so obviously trying not to scold him that Theron got up to open the door for her, put his arms around her, book and all, and murmured into her ear, "I *am* sorry, Sophia. I shall spend the day in pursuit of my manners, and I promise to find them before I set foot in Tremontaine House, which I further promise to do at a decent interval before dinner."

Against his cheek, he felt his mother smiling. "If you do that, Katherine will think you a changeling. It is sufficient if you come in time for the soup. It's only a family party after all, with Marcus and Susan."

Theron stood away from her. She was a tall woman: their eyes were almost at a level.

She kissed his brow. "Until tonight," she said, and strode away from him down the corridor to the grand staircase that led to the front door. Theron returned to the breakfast-room, poured his cold chocolate into the slop bowl, made himself a fresh cup, and drank it before ringing for more toast and a steak.

THERON WAS NOT PRESENT AT DOCTOR ST CLOUD'S lecture on the reign of Gerard the Last King. Basil was not really surprised, but he was disappointed. He'd hoped young Campion would be interested in his ideas as well as his body. I'm as much of a fool as poor King Hilary, he thought bitterly as he described Gerard's bloody additions to the rites of the Festival of Sowing. And Hilary had had the excuse of being mad.

Reluctant to return to his cold rooms and his love-tossed bed, Basil sought food and warmth at the Blackbird's Nest. The first thing that met his eye was Doctor Leonard Rugg sitting with his back to the room, staring morosely into a bowl of snapdragon gone cold. Basil went up to him. "You're looking glum, Rugg. What's the matter?"

"Nothing important," said the metaphysician. "I don't want to talk about it. The bitch." He gestured at an empty bench. "Sit down, St Cloud; have a drink. Have you heard the latest?"

"Probably not."

"You should get out more." Rugg peered at him over the rim of the bowl. "You look pale. You need to stir up your blood. I'll pass along my mistress if you like—the bitch. She'll stir anyone's blood."

Basil snagged the potboy, ordered brandy, and settled back. "Is that the latest?"

"Oh, no, no. It's Tremontaine again. Trouble all 'round. Lady Sophia's trying to endow a chair for *women*, if you please—"

"Lady Sophia?" Basil sat up. He had heard the same name from Theron's lips not twelve hours ago. "Lady Sophia *Campion?*"

"That's the one."

Basil was aware that there was a certain danger in pumping the greatest gossip in the University for information about his new lover. But he thought he might manage the trick, with a little care. "I suppose young Campion's trouble, too," he said wisely.

"I wouldn't say that." Rugg started to look more cheerful. "Never saw anything wrong with him myself; harmless enough puppy—though I hear that last mistress of his did him some damage. Still, no harm in him. Been coming to lectures since he was a lad. Can't stick to a subject, loves 'em all: an academic flirt, eh? Still, he probably knows more about history than I

do…and more about metaphysics than you do. What kind of trouble do they say he's in?"

Basil racked his brains for an unrevealing answer, aware that he was better at analyzing intrigue than engaging in it, even at this mild level. "Ah, disappointment to the family?" he hazarded at last.

"Ha!" Leonard Rugg roared. "It would take a lot of work for Campion to give his family a sleepless night, after what the father put them through!"

Basil tried to look knowing. "Yes, but…"

Rugg said expansively, "Oh, you're thinking of the Tremontaine Chair of Astronomy—certainly the old fellow did all that for us, and a great deal more besides. No one can say he wasn't generous to the University, although the women's mathematics scholarship created a considerable stir. But one can't imagine him as a *husband*, if you catch my drift."

Basil gave up trying to be subtle. "Leonard," he said as lightly as he could. "Who is Theron Campion's father?"

"Oh, don't you know? He's dead; be well over eighty now. Something in your line, I'd think, St Cloud, being history and all: he was Tremontaine, the Mad Duke. That one."

Basil said absently, "I don't do modern history," while his mind raced, trying to place the late Duke Tremontaine.

"No more do you," said Rugg, amused. "Listen carefully, then; there'll be a test when I'm done." He began ticking points off on his fingers: "Scandal number one: young noble went to University to study instead of to drink. Not done back then—not sure about now, either, but at least there's a pretense. Scandal number two: got kicked out, went to live with a swordsman in Riverside. Not done then either—living there, I mean. Not like now. Watch wouldn't even go there then. Scandal number three: inherits Tremontaine and fills the house with scholars, reprobates, and lovers of all, ah, shapes and sizes. Men, women, even historians." He dug his elbow into Basil's side. "If you know what I mean. The list goes on and on. Bestowed a rather colorful bastard on the city, too, though I hear she left town long ago. Scandal number…What was I up to?"

"Four," said Basil, fascinated.

"Scandal number four: he was driven into exile, passing the duchy to his niece, the Lady Katherine Talbert. Then back he comes, years later, with a beautiful foreigner in tow, who claims to be his lawful wife, and

conveniently produces a legitimate heir two months after the Mad Duke's death."

"And the beautiful foreigner is the Lady Sophia."

"Damned queer woman. But odds are the boy will still inherit on his cousin's death."

"Inherit the duchy?"

"So it really doesn't matter what he studies, does it?"

"On the contrary," said Basil shortly. "I think it matters a great deal. If there's one thing history has to teach us, it's the importance of educating the ruling class in the realities of life."

Rugg laughed. "They'll hardly learn that in University, dear boy."

"Oh, I don't know," a voice above them drawled. "Unheated lecture rooms, watered beer, incomprehensible feuds, indiscriminate sex, casual violence, and a general shortage of sleep seems uncommonly like real life to me."

Basil started as if he'd been shot. He wondered how much of the conversation Theron had overheard. He wondered whether the pounding of his heart were visible through his robe. He feared it might be.

Theron was speaking. "Doctor St Cloud, I wonder if I might trouble you for a word in private?" His light voice sounded annoyed, but that just might have been his aristocrat's drawl. Basil turned to look at him. The long mouth was hard and still.

Leonard Rugg punched him on the arm. "New student, eh? I wondered…Well, congratulations, St Cloud. Don't take a copper less than twenty for the term. He can afford it, can't you, Campion?"

Theron smiled tightly. "Yes," he said. "I can."

"Thank you, Rugg," said Basil. "I'm not exactly new at this, you know." He rose and looked around the tavern. "There," he indicated an empty table with his chin.

Basil stalked across the room. The boy should have told him who he was; he should never have approached him in public; he might at least have smiled at him. Basil sat down stiffly, determined to preserve his dignity, and saw that Theron was convulsed with silent laughter.

"Was I perfect?" he chortled. Basil stared at him suspiciously. "Well, *Doctor* St Cloud?"

"Campion, are you mad?" Basil growled. "Or am I supposed to say, *Lord Theron?*"

"I'm sorry." The student wiped tears from his eyes. "I'm ruining the effect, aren't I?" He reached across the table, touched Basil's hand lightly. The scholar's insides lit up like fireworks. "Let us discuss fees, then, so as not to disappoint Doctor Rugg. Tell me—" He leaned forward. Basil smelled his mouth, sweet with mint and the tang of his breath. "How much must I pay for another lesson like last night's?"

The green eyes were flecked with gold. Basil smiled. "I wonder," he murmured, "if you remember your lesson?"

"Perfectly," the boy smiled back. "I paid particular attention. And now I would know more."

"Would you, indeed?"

"You are the subject of my study, Doctor St—Basil. My desire is to understand you thoroughly, to uncover your mysteries, to pass examinations in your history and your tastes."

Basil laughed. "My history is not so interesting as yours, Master Campion."

"Oh?" said Theron, then, in a very different voice: "What has old Firenose been telling you? That I have a boundless appetite for men, women, and ponies? Or merely that I change lovers as often as I change suits of clothes? Not quite true. I deny the ponies. Are you going to bar me from your lectures?"

He looked at once haughty and so wounded that Basil reached out to him. Theron glanced down at Basil's hand, square and dark against his own fair skin, and smiled. "A tutorial," he murmured. "I've an hour free before Tipton's lecture."

TWO HOURS LATER, THEY LAY TOGETHER IN A WELTER of discarded garments and blankets. Theron's hair was spread over them both like a damp scarf.

"You're like one of the Forest Men in the old stories," Basil said dreamily, "the ones who could drive mortals mad with desire. But if you could get one to love you, they said you'd be young for a hundred years."

"And then what happened?"

Basil stroked a lock of shining hair around his finger. "You died of galloping old age."

"Ech." Theron shivered and pulled a random piece of fabric up over his leafy chest. "I've never heard that one before. Who told it to you?"

"Oh, my mother, probably. She knew a lot of stories."

"Really?" Theron was amazed at the things he and his erudite lover had in common. "So did mine! But they're all from Kyros."

"I'd like to hear them someday."

"Mmm." The end of Theron's hair had somehow found its way to the soft skin inside Basil's elbow, and was making quiet havoc there. "But mostly she told me about my father. You know, the famous Mad Duke. Who wasn't a duke by the time she married him on Kyros—and not mad, either, at least by her account."

"A flexible fellow."

"You have no idea. My father," Theron went on, warming to his theme, "was a colorful character. I thought, when I was younger, that I would try to be more colorful still. Finding that to be impossible, I settle for pleasing myself. A variety of lovers is a family tradition, really."

"It's an older tradition than that," Basil informed him. "Hollis tells us the most ancient kings were encouraged to take many lovers of both sexes. The wizards—"

"Wizards and kings," interrupted Theron, "are not of any great interest to me right now. They're dead, after all."

"And so are Aria and Palaemon and Redding, and all the other great poets and playwrights you rhetoricians swear by." Basil pulled himself upright against the pillows. "The past is never dead, Theron. It lives on in the present, in our laws and our customs, even in the way we think and speak. Stop that, Theron, I'm making a speech."

Theron lifted his head and smiled. "It's a very good speech," he said, "and I don't disagree with you. I'm hoping to find immortality through my poems, when I finally write some worth saving. At the moment, though, I'm far more interested in you and your body and my body and the pleasure we can give each other."

Since he'd been busy with his fingers as he spoke, Basil was in no state to argue with him, and Theron's moment spread to encompass Basil's past, present, and future in one brief eternity of perfect sensation. They were just

sinking into sleep when Theron sat up suddenly. “There’s the bell striking five, and if I don’t hurry, I’ll be late to dinner again and I promised Sophia faithfully that I would be on time. Shall I see you tomorrow?”

He was out of bed now, picking up his clothes from the floor and the bed. Basil pulled the quilts around himself and watched his lover dress, stopping him once to kiss the oak leaf drawn along his collarbone before it disappeared under his linen shirt.

“You haven’t told me about that tattoo yet,” Basil said as Theron shrugged into his braided jacket.

“No,” said Theron shortly. “I haven’t. It’s a long and silly story, and I don’t want to waste our time on it.”

He put on his cloak, then half-knelt on the bed to kiss Basil’s mouth. Basil caught his face in his hand and held it firm. “I’ll hear it tomorrow,” he said. “Dine with me—I’ll have Bet send up a pie. We’ll have the whole evening.”

The greenish eyes looked into his. “It may take all night,” Theron said.

“Good,” said Basil, his heart racing. “I like long stories.”

chapter VII

TO PLEASE HIS MOTHER, THERON WAS NOT LATE for dinner at Tremontaine House. He was, in fact, early, which gave him time to wander about the wet gardens of its impressive grounds. He was drawn to some of his favorite childhood spots: the rose bower, where a few autumn blossoms doggedly bloomed, and the boxwood walk, dotted with classical

sculpture. From old habit he touched the nose of the piping Goat God for luck, and even walked past the Transformation of Laurel with his eyes closed. He always used to hate the sight of the young man being engulfed in bark. He was far too old for such fancies, but he felt it again this time, a frisson of fear such as a child feels, who dreamed and cannot remember what frightened him.

There was nothing to fear. Life was good. He had a new lover, the young magister, so brilliant, so eager; it was just what he'd wanted, exactly what he'd dreamed of happening between them all these weeks. But Ysaud, too, had filled him with this crystal joy at first.

Theron broke a twig off and crushed it. Ysaud had chosen him, seduced him, really, with her artist's eye and her craftsman's hand. Her master's hand. And he had been her masterpiece for a while. He smelled the crushed yew rich on his fingers and something else as well, and sighed with sensual pleasure. Basil, he had chosen for himself. Just when Theron had thought his heart was frozen forever he'd seen the magister in a tavern and been drawn to him, and wondered. And so he'd gone where Basil St Cloud had gone, watching him cast off those bright sparks of wit and insight, passion and faithfulness to learning that bespoke an honest man, a sincere man, a man to be pursued. For a while, Theron had wondered whether Basil's eye would ever fall on him at all, and if it did, whether it would regard him with favor. Now he knew.

Theron found himself looking straight up at the dangerous Laurel sculpture. Rain had washed some dirt down it, and lichen was growing there, making the sculptor's highly textured tree seem even more lifelike in the twilight. A young man with marble skin reached out beseechingly from the bark encasing his legs, his thighs…

As one who, human, offered not his fruit
To one bright god
Must live condemned to offer it to all.
Ah! Bitter immortality! Majestic—something—

He'd forgotten the rest of the verse. There probably was a copy in the duchess's library. Lord Theron strode through the gathering shadows into the bright-lit halls of Tremontaine House.

By the time he emerged from the library with the book he wanted, he was indeed late for supper.

THE DUCHESS KATHERINE'S GUESTS WERE NOT UNAWARE of Theron's absence, but for a variety of reasons were trying to pretend it didn't matter. They were assembled in a sitting room overlooking the river, furnished with comfortable peacock blue chairs, tables covered with curios, a card table with a game board, and a little escritoire in case anyone was suddenly struck with the urgent need to write a note. The duchess was deep in conversation with Marcus. Marcus's wife Susan was playing tric-trac with their youngest son, Andrew, who was simultaneously trying to explain the rules to Lady Sophia. Sophia, out of courtesy and the sense that she was never really going to understand the ways of her adopted country if she didn't keep making an effort, was trying gamely to be interested, but her attention kept straying to the two very pregnant young women seated side by side on the divan, their feet propped up on stools.

Diana and Isabel Ffoliot were identical twins. Both had married last year, but Diana was a bit farther along than Isabel, and Sophia was dying to ask her about false contractions. But Andrew was saying, "Now it looks like Mother's got me beaten. But if I can throw Doublets here…" He picked up the dice. Sophia nodded absently.

"I'm starving," Diana growled to her sister. "Where's Theron?"

Their mother flashed them a warning look. Susan Ffoliot was looking forward to as pleasant an evening as could be hoped for considering the family's various colorful personalities. "Pass your sisters the biscuits," she instructed her son.

The twins were Theron's age, and as close to sisters as he could get; he had grown up tumbling about with Susan's brood in their cozy house as much as he had in the imposing mansion of the Duchess Katherine, or his mother's rambling Riverside home. He had always prayed that neither twin show any interest in scholarship; either one of them at the University, choosing to open her mouth, and he would be ruined. They knew far too much about him.

Diana took two biscuits, frowned, and put them down again. "I'll bet you anything our Theron is still in bed somewhere. Maybe we should send out the dogs."

Isabel snickered. "Oh, hush, Di. Mother says he's a reformed character."

"Mother," said her twin, "doesn't know him as well as we do. I would say it's just taking him a while to creep his way back up from the slimy bottom of whatever well that artist was keeping him in."

Lord Alexander Theron Tielman Campion chose that moment to enter, bright-eyed, in a swirl of long hair and a blue suit that didn't really go with the room. "Sorry," he said to everyone; "I was here, didn't Farraday tell you? I just ducked into the library to look something up. I thought you'd start without me."

"Hello, Alexander," said his cousin Katherine, Duchess Tremontaine. She'd used his actual first name. Not good. "What were you reading—nothing modern, I imagine?"

Oh, wonderful. He'd just walked in the door and managed to put her back up already. He darted an eye at the gravid twins on the sofa; they returned the look blandly. No help there. He dealt the duchess the most charming smile he could muster. "How well you know me. Poetry, actually. Did you know you have a hand-scribed copy of Aria's *Transformations*?" He really didn't feel up to Katherine before soup. She'd be a lot more agreeable when she'd eaten.

Fortunately, Marcus stepped in. "Katie," he said to the duchess, "consider the source." There he stood, graying and bland, the perfect factotum: Marcus Ffoliot, marshal of the Tremontaine fortunes for the past forty years. He'd taught Theron to spin a top. Right now, Theron wanted to kill him. "Allow me to observe," Marcus went on with mock severity, "that, as a point of law, being *in the house* does constitute being *here*; although the status of the library as a separate branch limits…"

"…limits all our access to dinner." Laughing, Katherine finished the sentence for him. No one else knew what the two of them were talking about, but they were all used to it.

"I think dinner is an excellent idea," said Susan Ffoliot. Marcus's wife had long suspected that she was the only person of the whole menage who understood how families were actually supposed to operate. But she enjoyed

watching the rest of them playing at it, and so she interfered only when things threatened to get out of hand. "With your permission, Duchess?"

After the soup, matters improved. The twins unbent enough to answer Theron's inquiries about their absent husbands, and even to tease him about his hair. Mostly they discussed childbirth with Theron's mother.

Lady Sophia did, however, ask about Aria's *Transformations*, which got everyone onto the subject of the statues in the garden. Interest in things Tremontaine was always acceptable at the dinner table.

Susan Ffoliot gave Theron a grin. "I am so glad those statues are there. The girls learned such a lot about human anatomy without my ever having to explain it to them. Andrew, sit up straight or you'll grow up hunchbacked."

Andrew shrugged his shoulders and hunkered down in his seat.

The conversation at the duchess's end of the table had shifted back to current affairs. Katherine was leaning across the table, making a point to her old friend and confederate. Theron heard her tell Marcus, "And now the Serpent wants the Crescent's man to look into it, though I can't imagine what for. I refuse to get dragged in, that's all; it's nothing to do with Tremontaine. Let Hartsholt worry about it; it's his land."

Theron wondered what Basil would make of the group gathered at the family table. He made a note never to try and explain to Basil that Marcus and Susan *were* family. It would probably serve as further proof that the ruling classes were somehow decadent—not that Theron would call Katherine decadent, himself. A woman near sixty who rose at five, did paperwork for two hours, and practiced the sword before breakfast was not his idea of the thing at all.

He took a bite offish just as Katherine turned her attention to him: "What about you, Theron? Do you hear anything about the ancient kings there at University?" He nearly choked. "Or are you studying geography these days?"

"Rhetoric, actually." Theron coughed, and waved away the helping hands. "Language. Are you talking about Tortua's lecture?"

"Poor Doctor Tortua," mused Sophia. "He was so lively when he was young; I remember him at one Sowing Festival being very silly with a painted pole. I suspect a seizure of the brain, though Treadwell thinks it's an excess of bile in his liver."

Katherine tried not to look annoyed. “I was talking about the City Sessions, not University gossip. Honestly, doesn’t anything penetrate those streets from outside? And they say that the Council of Lords is out of touch with the City! I bet you didn’t even hear.”

“Didn’t hear what?” Diana asked. “Do you mean that lunatic standing up in open Sessions and petitioning the Mayor for the kings to be reestablished? My husband told me. Everyone in the banks was talking about it.”

“Kings.” Isabel shuddered. “Just what we need. Power-mad tyrants pushing us all around. Who on earth thinks that’s a good idea?”

“The kings weren’t all bad.” Theron hated ignorance. “If you go back far enough, you find—”

“Death to tyranny!” shouted Andrew. It hadn’t been that long since he and his friends had played Wizards Against Nobles up and down the stairs, and he knew his lines. His sisters shushed him.

“It’s the North,” his father said. “They’re having terrible times up there, with the weather and rotten harvests. Either too much rain or too little. How they hope a king will help is beyond me, but it seems to be the way people think: that radical troubles call for radical change. What did the Duke of Hartsholt say about this kings business?” he asked Katherine. “Was he there?”

“Hartsholt miss a meeting of the Inner Council? He loves getting the chance to dress up almost as much as I do.”

It was true. If the formidable duchess had a weakness, it was clothing. And she had a wide range to draw on. From her earliest days in the city, when her uncle, Theron’s father the Mad Duke, had had her trained as a swordsman, she had worn men’s clothing more often than not. But she also possessed a notable collection of ball dresses. Tonight the duchess was wearing a gaudy, shapeless over-gown, the sort she favored at home, where she fondly believed what she looked like didn’t matter. She had quite a collection of these, in various jewel-toned velvets and silk brocades. She tended to throw them on over just about anything and consider herself dressed. Once Theron was sure he’d seen her dine in one over a nightshift.

“What’s amazing,” she continued, “is that Arlen himself was there, all got up in his Serpent Chancellor robes. I was surprised; he doesn’t usually so honor us. But with Lord Horn beginning another term as Crescent, and

Edmond Godwin stepping down as Raven although we specifically asked him not to—well, Arlen must have wanted to show where he stood, with the Crescent and Dragon."

Marcus leaned over the table to his young son. "You have not, of course," he said, "heard any of this."

It used to work with Theron when he was that age: the implication that all political discussions were very secret and important, that he was not to understand them—and therefore would try as hard as he could to decode them. He'd even followed Katherine and her staff into the Council Hall—where he'd discovered that the sessions of the Council of Lords did not consist of men garbed as mythic beings fighting for great causes. The chancellors had colorful names and colorful robes, but it was only symbols. (He'd actually dreamed of being Dragon Chancellor someday, until he found out all it was was Chancellor of the Exchequer.) Half the Council of Lords behaved like a theatre audience, and the other half like boring lecturers droning on and on about taxes and rights of property and procedure. Even the exclusive meetings of the Inner Council, comprised only of the ducal houses and the elected Chancellors, which he'd been permitted once to attend as Katherine's heir apparent, was far too much like just another grown-up party, without any drinks. Finally, it all boiled down to a lot of bad-tempered people trying to disagree without appearing to be rude to each other.

Still, it kept things running, and he'd be doing it himself some day—a thought that gave him no pleasure at all. Now he had the idea that the duchess would be very pleased if he contributed something to the discussion she'd begun. "The University," Theron said, "looks at the kings from another angle. Not political, but historical."

Katherine gave him a long look that was meant to be benign, but failed. "And I'm sure that's very interesting. But when you're ready to come and join us here in the present, I hope you'll let me know."

Theron stood his ground. "But history is what has created the present!"

"Theron," Marcus said indulgently, "it's theory versus application. You can't win."

"You need a theory to apply!" Theron protested.

"But a theory based on what? On present fact."

"On precedent."

"Precedent says that monarchy is a useless form of government," Katherine put in. "That's all the history we need to know." She wrinkled her nose. "How can you stand to study that stuff? Dates and treaties; I never could abide it."

"Our very own rights and privileges come from precedent," Theron persisted. "If we want to maintain and perpetuate them into the future, don't you think we need to understand why?"

"Here's a future for you," Marcus grinned. "Right now, Hartsholt's lands are in disarray, and his son is running him into debt. He has two daughters. Marry one of them, and you can add huge Northern holdings to Tremontaine."

"I wouldn't allow it," Katherine intervened cheerfully. "The North has never been anything but trouble. Theron's going to have to look elsewhere for his bride. Have you considered anyone new lately, cousin?"

Andrew sniggered. Oh, to be thirteen again, Theron thought enviously, and just shrug his shoulders and glower.

"Stop tormenting the boy," Susan told her husband and his employer. "This is a dinner, not a Council meeting…honestly. More peas, Theron?"

His mother said to Susan, "I never know if you're just being kind, or if this is something I still don't understand, of what is all right to talk about with food, and what is not?"

Susan opened her mouth, but her youngest son spoke up unexpectedly. "It isn't the food, Lady Sophia, it's the meal. Dinner together," he quoted piously, "is supposed to be a pleasant occasion."

"So," Sophia reiterated: "nothing to do with human bodies, dead or alive or in transition…this I understand for many years, now. But—no business? Or"—she glanced at Theron—"just no business my son doesn't want to hear?"

The duchess applauded. "I do love hearing you figure things out, Sophia, it makes it all so much clearer. But honestly, Susan, all any of us is interested in is business of one kind or another. Can't the family get some kind of exemption? Or is it all to be Andy's latest kickball match, and whatever Theron is studying?"

"I study, too," Andrew objected.

"Of course you do," said his father warmly. Marcus persisted in adoring all his brood, no matter what sort of difficult stage they were passing

through. “Your schoolmaster tells us you’re a wizard at spelling.”

Theron said, “You’ve still got him in school, Marcus? Let me know when you’re ready to get him a tutor. I know plenty of good men at University who could use the employment.”

Andrew kicked his chair leg. “I like school. We play ball at the breaks. And anyway, my master says that University men know all too much about all too little—whatever that means,” he added, hoping to save himself from a scolding.

Lord Theron laughed. “I’ll bet he does. But you see, Andy, learning can be a joy in itself, when you find something that interests you.”

Andrew gave him the age-old look the young reserve for the idiocies of their elders.

His very well-mannered father said, “Thank you, Theron. When he is ready for a tutor, I’ll ask you for advice.”

“It’s not that we haven’t thought about it,” Susan added. “If Andy takes to a subject when he’s a little older, we thought he might go straight to University.” Andrew made a face. His mother gave him a look.

“In any case,” Marcus went on, “while we’d be glad to help out any of your friends, Theron, I hardly think teaching a city man’s son is the prize they’re aiming for.”

“Well, of course most of them would love to devote themselves to pure scholarship, but that being a starving sort of proposition, I expect they could be induced to teach this brat the astrolabe,” Theron said fondly.

Katherine dangled a golden ring over her wineglass; she had a habit of taking her rings off and on during a meal. “What Marcus meant, Theron, is that I’m sure the post they’d all be aiming for would be something on your own staff, when you have one.”

Susan and Lady Sophia exchanged a look across the table.

Theron said haughtily, “My friends are not aiming for any sort of position.”

“Oh, come, my dear.” Katherine was doing her best not to provoke him, but her best wasn’t very effective, since she was not one to back down on a point. “I’m sure they’re very fond of you, but they know that when you take your place in Council there will be important positions to be filled. University men are ideal to fill them, and you seem to know them all.”

“I know them well enough to know a friend from a toady.”

The Duchess Katherine took a long drink of wine. Her face emerged from the goblet a reasonable shade. She said mildly, "I should like to meet these admirable friends of yours."

Concerned for her feelings, Sophia said, "Theron does not have his friends to the house, not even in Riverside with us."

But the duchess was just warming up. "I wonder," she asked the air, "what is so particularly unappealing about Tremontaine House? Jessica never wanted to bring anyone here either."

"You can't compare Theron to poor Jessica," Susan Ffoliot put in unwisely.

Katherine ignored her. "I have entertained a great many people in this house, at this very table, in fact. Few, if any, have ever complained of the comfort, the food, or the conversation."

A glacial stillness descended on the room. Marcus was looking at Katherine with puzzled concern. He never understood what made her pick at her heir, and privately she admitted that she didn't really either. "It's the way he just closes us off," she essayed once. "It makes me want to break him open—to see what's in there, maybe. If anything is at all."

Theron was priding himself on not losing his temper. He might be a great disappointment, but at least he maintained his self-control and dignity.

Sophia grieved, not for the first time, over the trouble between her son and his cousin. Sophia loved Katherine with the fierce loyalty of a stray who had been taken in out of the storm, given a safe place to raise her son and support in her chosen career. She loved the duchess for being a woman who commanded and did not care what people might think. At the same time, Sophia felt protective of her; she knew how hard it was.

None of these feelings was useful when Theron and Katherine butted heads. But Tremontaines, she had discovered, could almost always be distracted by asking them a question with a complicated answer. She was sifting her brain for one, when Diana, who had been oddly silent, let out a shout.

The girl looked sheepishly around at the startled faces. "Sorry. This has been going on for days. That one just surprised me, is all."

Sophia glanced from her sweating face to her untouched dinner and said, "You'd better walk about for a bit. I will attend you."

"I'm sure it's nothing." Diana waved her away, then yelped and clutched her belly. "Oh, dear. Is this it? It is, isn't it? What happens next?"

"I will tell you as we walk," Sophia said. "It is not proper dinner table conversation." She helped Diana to her feet. "Marcus, take the boy home and send word to Martin. Theron, ask Farraday to send to Riverside for my bag. Oh, there's no need to hurry. First babies are never anxious to come into the world. Sit down, all of you, and eat your fruit."

Whatever people might say about the Tremontaines and their habits—and they said a lot—Sophia was still one of the best midwives in the city. Sure enough, Diana's son was born the next day, having already done much to improve the atmosphere of the family circle.

chapter VIII

THE AIR GREW CRISP, THE LEAVES IN THE HILL gardens colored, and ripe nuts fell from the chestnut trees. Basil St Cloud found that regular physical satisfaction sharpened his mind. He was getting more work done in less time, the patterns of fact and opinion lurking in the documents he read leaping to his eye as they'd never done before. Chastity was bad for you—he'd always suspected it. He was contemplating writing up a paper about it for the natural scientists.

He was walking home from the University Archives, his head full of Theron and the problem of Article Twenty-four in the Treaty of Union. His feet were pretty much looking out for themselves, and he'd surely have come to grief if the students weren't so accustomed to avoiding the erratic

path of a man lost in thought. He was just considering the significance of the Wizard Mezentian's stipulation that King Alcuin could take as many mistresses as he pleased, provided that none of his bastards could inherit the throne, when he became aware that someone was tugging on his sleeve. Basil swore and turned around to face something like a tall pile of rags crowned with a shock of iron-gray hair.

"Foster Rag-and-Bone," he said, stifling his irritation. "It's been a long time. Do you have anything for me?"

The shock of hair split to reveal three brown teeth. "Something," Foster Rag-and-Bone said. "Looky here and see."

"Here" was the wooden handcart that served as Foster's shop. Just now, it contained a bundle of rags that looked to be someone's worn-out bed curtains, some tarnished brass lamps, and a small and battered wooden chest, bound and clasped in pitted metal. Not iron, it wasn't rusty—bronze, maybe. Old, at any rate. Very old.

"What's in it?" Basil asked.

"That's the question, isn't it?" Foster sneezed juicily and wiped his nose with the heel of his hand. "Don't have the key, do I? Might be valuable, might be shit. It'll cost you twenty silver to find out."

"Twenty silver?" Basil laughed. "For a moldy chest full of someone's ancient linen? Do you think I'm soft in the head?"

"'S not linen," Foster insisted. "Heavy; shifty. Like papers or books or boxes. I know."

"Linen." Basil was enjoying himself. "Ancient handkerchiefs and stockings, all packed up neatly for storage."

"Too heavy. Books. Papers. Letters. I should know the sound by now, I've been looking that long for you."

"Old bills, then. Shopping lists. The odd love letter, if I'm lucky, from someone history has forgotten to someone history remembers. A book on cheese making. I'll give you one hundred coppers."

"Fifteen silver. History remembers these papers. There's a crest on the lock, see?"

Basil peered at the lock. The metal was severely corroded, but there was definitely something there: A deer? A tree? Nothing he recognized in either case, but interesting, definitely interesting. The chest itself reminded Basil of some of the older document boxes he'd seen in the Archives. His heart

began to race. This could hold something very important indeed. How much money did he have? Not fifteen silver, at any rate. And Foster Rag-and-Bone did not believe in extending credit.

"It does look a little like a crest," he said to Foster at last. "But it's not one of the great families, or I'd recognize it. Five silver, and if you think you can get more for it from someone else, you're welcome to try. Remember, though, that someone else might actually care how you came by such an ancient and valuable item."

Foster Rag-and-Bone grumbled and Foster Rag-and-Bone whined, but in the end he nodded his verminous head and spat on the pavement to seal the bargain. He followed Basil to Minchin Street with his handcart and waited in the entrance, exchanging amiable insults with the scruffy boy while Basil ransacked his rooms for the strongbox in which he kept his students' fees. It contained precisely fourteen silver coins and a handful of coppers.

"There's another copper in it for you if you carry it up to the landing," he told Foster when he'd counted out the silver coins into his hand.

The scruffy boy interfered. "Not a step further—it'll take me all day to get the smell out as it is. I'll carry the box for you, Doctor St Cloud."

It was indeed heavy, too heavy for the boy alone, and the contents did indeed slide and thunk against the sides as books would slide. And it was locked fast. After some thought, Basil sent the boy down to his nest for some oil and a feather and a wooden wedge and a hammer, with which he forced the lock as gently as he could manage. When he was done, it would never lock again, but the crest wasn't much more damaged than it had been. The hasps were all but frozen shut, but he released them at last and the trunk opened reluctantly, with a screech of hinges. Inside were bundles of yellowed paper tied with tape: letters, folded and sealed with colored wax. Swan, Tower, Phoenix, Raven—that might be interesting. Basil smoothed the brittle page on his desk and peered at the spidery writing. *Whearas…Nort Countree…Wizards their exemption…*that next word had to be *taxes*, or maybe the one after. Not very interesting after all. He'd found their like before. Still, he'd have to comb through them carefully, later, just in case. A good job for one of his students, that.

Next was a pair of finely bound notebooks that announced themselves as the daybooks of the Wizard Arioso. It seemed to contain notes on the

daily life of a court wizard of some three hundred years back, judging by the language. Interesting indeed, possibly exciting in a slightly distasteful way, and likely to shed some light on whether or not the wizards believed in their own lies. At least Arioso wrote a fairly clear hand and used expensive ink that had not faded. Basil scanned a page eagerly for the name of the ruling king. Oh, there it was: "A plague of rattes in Treymontayne—King Rufus, hys eye being to the Duke his datter, did commaund of mee thatt I ridde the playce of them." Too bad. Rufus was one of the boring ones.

Another packet of papers crumbled when Basil touched it—a pity, but such things had happened before, and there was no use mourning over them. That left a square package wrapped in yellowed linen.

Basil picked it out of the box—it was remarkably heavy for its size—and laying it on his lap, eased aside the folds of cloth like petals. A book, quarto size, its brown leather binding sueded with age and damp. Stamped on the cover was an oak leaf, its gilding all worn away save for a few bright flakes. Basil stroked the spine with one finger. The leather suddenly reminded him of Theron's skin, cool and a little sticky with drying sweat. He sat for a moment, lost in erotic reverie, his hands idly caressing the book. When he came to, he wasn't so much shocked at what was going through his mind—it had often enough, since he'd met Theron—as at the strange vividness of it, as if he had the boy there and naked before him.

Hurriedly, he wrapped up the book without looking at it, packed it in the document box with the rest of the papers, and slid the whole under his bed. Wizards' journals, indeed! He might as well have bought a box of pornographic sketches. The contents of the document box were intensely interesting, even historically useful in a perverse sort of way, but not at all respectable. Worth five silvers, though, no doubt about it. Basil smiled. It wasn't often he got the better of one of Foster Rag-and-Bone's bargains.

SOME WEEKS AFTER HIS INTERVIEW WITH LORD ARLEN, Nicholas Galing found himself on his way to the Middle City. His attempts to penetrate University society had yielded very little save frustration. All that his frequenting of taverns had taught him was that Northerners drink cider, not ale, and, like nicely-brought-up children, refuse to speak to strangers.

Even the Southern scholars had not been welcoming. University people, he thought, were like virgins at a ball: there was no getting near them without an introduction. Nicholas didn't want to get near them. They bored him glassy-eyed, with their long hair and their long words and their impractical ideals. Yet his instincts told him that Arlen was right. Something was going on—he could feel it running under the most innocuous conversations like a hidden current. What he needed was help, and the only man he trusted to ask for it was his old playmate and lover, Edward Tielman.

Somewhat to Nicholas's surprise, Edward Tielman had done very well for himself after University. He had impressed Julian, Lord Horn, with his Fellowship in Metaphysics and his calm common sense, rising from general dogsbody to private secretary in an indecently short span of time for a man who was neither well-born nor beautiful to look at. And Lord Horn had risen at the same time; Edward's employer had recently been elected Crescent Chancellor of the Council of Lords. On his patron's elevation, Edward had bought a little house off Tilney Market between the Council buildings and the Hill. It was a part of the city Nicholas seldom frequented, so he hired a linkboy to lead him.

It was raining like arrows in a siege, a vile night for walking. The linkboy squinted at the fine gentleman in his dandified caped coat and his fancy boots and asked hopefully, "D'ye want me to fetch you a chaise, sir? It's cruel mucky underfoot."

"No," said Nicholas. "I prefer to walk."

The linkboy shrugged his opinion of men who ruined their boots and gave themselves chills slogging through the wet when they could perfectly well afford to ride, thus robbing poor boys of their cut from the chaise-drivers. "Where to, sir?" he asked.

"Fulsom Street," said Nicholas.

The linkboy hoisted his torch and trudged off stoically. The follies of the rich were no business of his and he was already wet through. Nicholas, on the other hand, was soon uncomfortably chilled and damp. Pride kept him walking, however, and before long his guide had led him from the wide streets of the Hill to the Middle City, where houses and shops stood side by side and the linkboys gathered on street corners, ready to carry bundles for housewives out shopping or light their husbands home for dinner.

As they passed Dupree's chocolate-house the door opened, releasing two gentlemen in earnest conversation and a blast of cinnamon-flavored air. Nicholas hesitated. He'd been there once with Edward, and it did smell so warm and enticing. Alerted by the sixth sense common to his profession, the linkboy appeared at Nicholas's side. "That'll be three coppers," he said, "if you ain't going no further."

Nicholas made his decision, gave the boy his coppers, and pushed into the noisy, fragrant room. He was immediately rewarded by a familiar voice hailing him: "Lord Nicholas! What good wind blew you here? Come and sit down."

It was Edward Tielman, in the midst of a convivial group of clerkly men. Nicholas nodded courteously, but made no move to join them. "I was just on my way to your house," he told Tielman. "Got a craving for a quiet evening by another man's fire, watching his wife darn socks. Came in here to warm my feet." He stamped to demonstrate how cold they were. "Lucky thing, eh? I'd have had to walk home again if I hadn't."

"Can't imagine why you walked in the first place." Tielman slipped his cloak around his shoulders, threw some coins on the table, and held out his bowl of chocolate, "Take this for the road, Galing—it's still quite hot—and we'll be off. Felicity *will* be pleased."

"To see you, you dog," said Nicholas, and drank off the chocolate. It was typical chocolate-house stuff—too sweet and not strong enough—but it was hot. He realized just how wet and cold he really was.

Tielman's house wasn't far from Dupree's, and soon enough Nicholas found himself seated by the fire in Tielman's bright parlor, a pair of borrowed slippers on his cold feet, a borrowed dressing-gown around his shoulders. Everything in the room was very cozy and comfortable, even the pretty brown-haired young woman in a loose gown, who was adjusting Galing's coat over a chair back and making sure his boots were the proper distance from the fire.

"We don't want them to scorch, do we?" she asked rhetorically. "Really, we should just let them dry by themselves—any degree of heat whatsoever is *fatal* to good leather, but it takes forever!"

Nicholas liked Felicity Tielman. She was the daughter of the richest wool-merchant in the city, a man who kept a house in the country that he was too busy to visit. She was as well brought up as any daughter of the

nobility, and much better educated than most. He bore her no ill-will for taking Edward from him—she hadn't. When Nicholas had come to the city and the noble who was then Raven Chancellor had taken a fancy to him, he had discovered that he preferred a man of power in his bed. These being somewhat hard to come by, he'd made do since with men from the docks and the services offered by discreet establishments catering to specialized tastes. Edward was welcome to his Felicity. She was the perfect wife for a rising politician.

"There," she said, resuming her chair and picking up her tapestry-work. "Soon Fedders will be here with the soup, and then you will be perfectly comfortable."

"I am already perfectly comfortable," said Nicholas, sipping at a tumbler of hot rum punch.

"Wonderful!" said Tielman. "Then you can tell me all the gossip. Horn keeps my nose so tight to that infernal Corn Bill, I've no chance to think of anything else."

Felicity set a stitch with an impatient little jerk. "Men! All they talk is scandal, which *they* call politics, and then they have the effrontery to call women gossips!"

"I'm sure I never called you a gossip, my dear," Tielman protested. "I've always maintained that you were as disinterested as the Court of Honor and at least twice as discreet."

"I'm not impressed," said Felicity, unmollified. "As far as I know, twice nothing is still and always nothing."

"You must confess she has you there," said Nicholas.

Tielman shrugged. "I never went in for mathematics. Very well, my love. You may never gossip, but I am starved for it. What news on the Hill, Galing? I want to hear everything."

Nicholas launched into a lively description of Lady Nevilleson's last ball, with all changes of partner, both apparent and speculative, fully noted. Felicity exclaimed in pretended shock and rang for cold meat and wine. The conversation wandered inevitably onto politics. The Corn Bill came in for a particularly thorough examination, in which Felicity bore an enthusiastic part until she chanced to catch sight of the pretty gilt clock on the mantelpiece.

"It's past midnight," she announced. "It's no wonder you're making no sense—you're tired. I'm going to bed. You may stay up and talk nonsense as long as you like. I'll have Fedders make up a bed for Lord Nicholas."

"No," said that gentleman, rising politely. "I've a word of business to drop in Ned's ear, and then I'm off to my own bed."

Tielman laughed. "Why is it," he inquired, "that one may easily stay up until dawn in company, but is yawning at midnight in the bosom of one's family? We'll finish the bottle, Galing, and then, if you don't care to sleep here, Fedders will find you a chaise."

"Do," said Felicity cordially. "I have a novel to finish; it's due at the library tomorrow. You'll be doing me a favor by keeping Edward for at least an hour longer."

Nicholas thanked her, kissed her cheek in a brotherly manner, and settled down into his chair again. Despite the rum punch and wine, he felt his mind to be as clear and sharp as a winter's night. It was time to broach Arlen's matter to Edward. He took breath to speak.

"Dear girl," said Tielman, resuming his chair. "She's in the family way, you know."

"Is she, by Heaven! Congratulations, Tielman. You must be very pleased."

"Yes."

A silence fell between them.

"Strange business last Sessions," said Tielman thoughtfully. "No telling whether there's anything in it beyond a madman and moonshine. Still, it never hurts to be sure. I'm entirely at your disposal."

Nicholas stared at him, a prey to complicated feelings. At last he said, as temperately as he could, "I understood it was a secret."

"Oh, it is," Tielman assured him. "Not even the Crescent knows that Arlen is putting his oar in. Officially, it's a tempest in a teapot, something for the old farts to shake their heads over after dinner. He doesn't want a fuss made. That's why he's put it in the hands of such politically small fish as the two of us."

"Small fish," murmured Nicholas, "I see."

"Small," said Tielman, "but daily growing. And we could be very big fish indeed if we scotch the plot in, er, the bud."

"If there is one," said Nicholas dryly. "You were never any good at rhetoric, you know."

"Nor was I. I am, however, pretty good at organizing things, which is a lot more useful."

"And I, it seems, am good at being told what to do."

Tielman looked at him sharply; the unsteady firelight cast a stranger's mask over his plump, good-natured face. "Nose out of joint?" he asked sympathetically. "It needn't be. You know he hates telling anyone anything straight out. There always has to be something held back."

"Everything's a test," said Nicholas bitterly. "I just wish I knew what he thinks he's testing."

"Don't think about it, Nick—don't think about him, or what he's testing, or you'll come to grief."

As he leaned forward earnestly, Nicholas found himself responding to Tielman's presence as he hadn't since they'd first been lovers. Being the Crescent's secretary had changed the steward's son in ways Nicholas hadn't seen until now. The Crescent's secretary was at the center of power, with access to the Crescent's ear and, through him, to the whole Inner Council. Edward—kind Edward, simple, hard-working Edward—was getting to be a powerful man.

Nicholas blinked and sat back. "Of course," he said. "Silly of me. Now. About those royalists."

There was a lot to talk about. Edward was an excellent interlocutor, asking pointed questions, offering theories, analyzing data. He was of the opinion that the Middle City would collectively drown itself in the river before it would countenance the least hint of royalist sentiment.

"Romantics don't become bankers and shopkeepers," he said. "What my colleagues know about the kings is that they were much more interested in the country than the city and favored farmers and woodsmen over merchants and manufacturers. You won't find any royalists in the Middle City. The University, though. That's another kettle of stew."

"Stew indeed." Nicholas sighed. "I wish I knew how to tell what was gristle and what was meat."

"You need a scholar." Tielman drank off the last of his wine. "University folk don't like strangers asking questions. A parochial bunch. Still, I think I can drum up a scholar to spy for you. I won't even have to tell him why, if I

make it mysterious enough. Students, unlike bankers, are romantics to a man. And these days, with all the fuss over the Horn Chair, it's easy to tell where everyone stands on the subject of the ancient kings."

"Ah," said Nicholas. "The Horn Chair. I've heard bits and pieces here and there, but I confess the importance of the whole escapes me."

"Felicity will have finished her book twice by now. I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Felicity is probably fast asleep." Nicholas smiled a slow, catlike smile he'd been told was irresistibly charming. "Tell me about the Horn Chair."

Tielman yawned. "The old Horn Chair of Ancient History will probably be asked to step down: ill-health, age—incompetence, really. At his last lecture, I hear he came this close to announcing that the wizards' magic was genuine, if you can believe that." He yawned again, painfully. "Damn it, Nick. This can wait."

"But I can't." Nicholas leaned forward to touch the back of Edward's hand and left his own hand lightly covering it.

Tielman lifted their linked hands and kissed his friend's fingers before removing his own from their grasp. "This is going to be complicated enough, Nick," he said gently.

Nicholas shrugged, reached for the poker, and stirred the dying fire into a brief blaze. Edward collected the boots from the edge of the hearth and felt the leather.

"Still damp, I'm afraid. But drier than they were, if you insist upon leaving. It's not too late to change your mind about the bed, you know."

Suddenly Nicholas was very tired and rather grateful that Tielman hadn't accepted his offer. "No, Ned. It's kind of you, but no. I'll take a chaise, if Fedders can roust one out at this hour."

While Nicholas pulled on his boots—which were, indeed, damp and somewhat stiff—and exchanged the borrowed dressing-gown for his dry jacket, Tielman rang for Fedders and instructed him to summon a chaise.

"He won't be long," he told Nicholas when the man had gone. "As for the University problem, I'll see to it myself. There's not much I can do before Harvest—the Corn Bill, you know—and it's important to find the right man. I'll let you know. In the meantime, you need to arrange a drop-off for his reports. You won't want him to send them to Lord Nicholas Galing, of course."

"Of course," echoed Nicholas, who hadn't given it a thought until that very moment. "He can direct them to, let's see, Green's chocolate-house on Lower Hill Street, to the attention of Mr. Black."

"Very colorful," said Tielman doubtfully. "Very memorable."

Nicholas controlled his temper with an effort. "Tell him to address them to Nicholas, then—it's a common enough name. I'll have someone collect them every few days."

Fedders appeared at the door, red-nosed and damp, announcing his lordship's chaise. Tielman accompanied Galing to the door and insisted upon helping him into his cloak. "It's been like old times, staying up too late with you, Nick," he said. "We must do this again, soon."

"Soon. Yes," said Nicholas, and stepped outside. His breath plumed out of his mouth—it had grown much colder. He'd been a fool to let desire overcome his judgment like that—he blamed the hot rum punch. No more rum punch and no more desire, he resolved, not unless it furthered his purposes. But he had the chaise-driver take him to Glinley's establishment in Riverside, and spent the remainder of the night in the embrace of a beautiful and expensive man with white hair and pale, amused eyes.

chapter IX

EVERY NIGHT, BASIL DREAMED: YOUNG MEN WITH lithe bodies and long, braided hair raced and wrestled on a great field while he looked on, weighing them against each other in his mind. When Theron lay under him twisting in his passion like a fish hooked on a line, Basil sometimes seemed

to enter the dreams in a waking state. The bright flashes of his pleasure seemed to be the flashes of sun on the young men's shields, his cries the ringing of the tiny bronze bells braided into their hair. And his arms holding Theron became the strong arms of an animal.

One night Basil woke alone with his heart shaking his chest, his lungs laboring, his mind muzzily certain that his dream sprang from something in the box under his bed. He found a lucifer and a candle, pulled on his shirt and gown, stirred up the fire, and unearthed the document box.

Not the packet of edicts and proclamations: they were as dry as week-old bread. Not Arioso's notebooks—he hadn't read them through, but what he had read suggested nothing like young men wrestling in green fields. That left the book with the leaf stamped on its cover.

Basil unwrapped it briskly, ignoring his reluctance. It was just a book, after all. An old book. He'd read old books before. It was his profession to read old books, the older the better.

The brown-black leather lay between his hands, swallowing the light from fire and candle, save for the sparks of gilding that lingered in the lobes of the oak leaf.

He knew it, then. Even before he opened it, he knew what it was. In it lay his dreams, and the dreams of many before him. Ancient as the Northern mountains, heavy as death, shrouded in linen, what else could it be? He opened it with fear, with awe, with trembling hands carefully wiped dry on his gown.

The pages were supple—some kind of skin, scraped fine as glove leather. They were covered from edge to edge with writing: a central block of text with notes swarming around its margins like gnats.

The text was no language he knew or had heard of: a lost language, a secret language marching across the fragile parchment pages in a square, bold hand. Some later hand had written headings in a comprehensible if archaic script: *For the Forcynge of the Trutthe, when Suspected of Treason; To Lend Glamore and Hony-tonge; For Callying upp the Wilde Beaste in a Man, Eche According to Hys Nature. For the Calmyng of May dens at Progresse-tyme.*

Basil scanned the blocks of text, first eagerly, then with a sickening frustration. The letters were recognizable, but they seemed to have been strung together at random into nonsense syllables. Hollis and Vespas had

been right. The book was unreadable. The wizards had been charlatans. Or else they hadn't. It was impossible to tell.

Tears of pure frustration blurred Basil's sight. The words danced mockingly in the firelight. One of them winked from the margin: "Guidry." Basil wiped his eyes and squinted: "To uncover such a coverynge," he read aloud, "would take the wit of Ca…*no*, Cephalus and the cunning of Guidry."

Guidry. He'd seen the name before. In Hollis? There was a place to start, anyway. And Cephalus—another wizard name, it had that slightly exotic flavor. He could send his students into the Archives, have them look up the lists of wizards, research some of the other names he now saw, scattered like candles around the darkly impenetrable central text. The hands were various, and their arguments obscure. "I did walk with it seven times, but waked only the seventh," one ran. And another, tantalizing, "This displeased His Maj., but when he has killed the deer he will think differently."

When he finally raised his eyes from the book, the window over his bed glowed with the pale blue-gray of dawn. Basil stood up and stretched. He was stiff and cold, and in a state of mental exaltation that surpassed delivering his first lecture, accepting his Doctorate, discovering the original Treaty of Union in the Archives. He had found the one book that would make it possible to revise not only the history of the City, but how it should be studied. In his two hands, Basil St Cloud held the lost Book of the King's Wizard.

As the term wore on, Doctor Roger Crabbe began to give small dinners for select magisters of the Faculty of Humane Sciences. Wine flowed freely at these dinners, and the main topic of discussion was radical styles of scholarship.

It was a pity, Crabbe said, that some scholars should seek out the crass and sensational just to swell their coffers with the coin of the idly curious. This matter of St Cloud and his lectures on kings and wizards, for example. Anyone who said his lectures flirted with treason was simply ignorant: certainly kings had existed in the ancient North, and had their wizards,

too, and they must have done *something* besides do coin tricks and oppress the innocent. (Pause for the inevitable laughter.) No, it was St Cloud's methodology that was at fault. Sending his students digging in the University Archives, teasing them with unanswerable questions, encouraging them to trot out antique and unprovable stories, and then treating whatever they found him as useful lessons from the past when in fact they were nothing but fairy tales. It was clear St Cloud was only going outside the traditional historical sources and approved regimen of study for the notoriety it gave him. You had to remember that he was young. There wasn't an ounce of harm in the boy, really.

And the older magisters, who had always taught as they themselves had been taught, shook their heads grimly at what the world was coming to.

The malicious whispers seeped like marsh gas out of Doctor Crabbe's rooms and through the streets and taverns of University. The younger, more forward-thinking scholars waited anxiously for Doctor St Cloud's countermove. But St Cloud seemed to have lost what little interest he'd had in public life, giving his controversial lectures and vanishing again without so much as buying his colleagues a beer or pointing out to them that there were many documents of unimpeachable authority, some of them in the University Archives, which, although they may not have found their way into the holy scriptures of the accepted authorities, were available for anyone to pick up and read. And that these documents supported not only his theses, but his teaching methods. Instead, he neglected even his most intimate friends to such an extent that Cassius was ready to wash his hands of him, and even Rugg and Elton were annoyed.

Still, they tried to be sympathetic, even jocular, when he made a rare appearance at the Blackbird's Nest. "Ancient kings keeping you busy, Basil, eh? Wizards casting spells of solitude on you?"

Basil blinked. "Did I miss our dinner, Cassius? I'm so sorry. I was working on my book."

"And very diligent you are, too." Rugg cleared his throat. "But a book alone won't get you the Horn Chair. Now is not the best time for you to disappear into your study."

Basil eyed the metaphysician with annoyance. "How else am I to get my work done? Shall I make speeches on street corners, like Crabbe? It's much

more useful for the ancient kings to keep me busy." His mouth twitched in secret amusement.

Had any of them cared to question the scruffy boy who kept the door at Minchin Street, he could have explained a lot. His fourth-floor tenant came in these days at odd hours, in the company of a long-haired student who tipped like a god. Sometimes they stayed in the magister's rooms together for hours at a time, and the boy made extra tips by running out on errands for wine and bread and meat pies—though seldom for candles, as before, and never paper or ink.

But no one asked him, and speculation ran unchecked.

IT WASN'T JUST BASIL'S RIVALS WHO WERE INTERESTED in the fate of the Horn Chair. The mathematicians at Bet's Good Eats were figuring the odds, and Basil's students were passionately monitoring their teacher's progress. They may not have known about his frequent visitor, but they certainly knew he always looked tired and he never wanted to come out for a drink. They were annoyed, they were worried, and they were as curious as cats.

Near the massive hearth of the Blackbird's Nest, up against one of the small-paned windows, was a table that was known as Historian's Corner. Blake and Vandeleur had staked it out when the weather began to turn cold, judging their money better spent on ale and tips to the potboy to save the corner for them than on wood to heat the little room they now shared. There they met and, in the magister's absence, subjected their observations on his recent curious behavior to the same kind of analysis he'd taught them to apply to historical texts.

"It's money trouble, count on it. He's spent it all on books and can't pay the rent."

"That's you, Lindley, not St Cloud," Benedict Vandeleur said. "No, it's his own book he's writing that's eating him alive. What I think is that he's out to win the Horn Chair. What do you think, Blake?"

In the weeks since he'd paid Basil St Cloud his student's fee, Justis Blake's life had changed utterly. He'd gone from being "of heaven knows what," the butt of Doctor Crabbe's humor, a country bumpkin hanging at the fringes of University life, to being Blake of Ancient History, St Cloud's

follower. He was at ease among these men as he had not been among Crabbe's Modernists or the men he'd met in the Mathematics and Natural Science lectures he'd attended the year before. His friendship with Benedict Vandeleur had grown over evenings spent listening to a new fiddler or spinning laughing shop-girls through the energetic steps of a country dance at the Spotted Cow. Some spirited arguments had shown him that Lindley was not as much of a drooping violet as he seemed; Lord Peter Godwin, four years his junior, reminded him of his little brother back on the farm. Even Henry Fremont wasn't so bad if you sat on him from time to time. And Doctor St Cloud. Well, Doctor St Cloud may have been well able to argue his way through a brick wall, but he hadn't the common sense of a day-old puppy. Justis felt quite fatherly toward him sometimes.

Justis thought for a moment. "You think he's writing about the North?" he asked Vandeleur, who nodded.

"Of course!" Lindley exclaimed. "It's coming clearer and clearer in the lectures that you can't understand the Union without knowing the old ways. The magister's writing a book that will change the world."

Justis Blake had gotten used to ignoring Lindley's romantic outbursts. He said to Vandeleur, "And you think that'll get him the Horn Chair?" It didn't seem likely to Justis that a book in which kings and wizards, however ancient, figured as heroes and statesmen was likely to find favor with the Governors. But it was not his place, as the newest of St Cloud's followers, to say so.

"Who else is eligible?" Godwin asked.

Vandeleur frowned thoughtfully. "Well, Doctor Wilson, for one."

"Don't make me laugh."

"He has more students than the Ferret—Doctor Ferrule, I mean," young Peter Godwin observed.

"Have you ever heard him lecture?" said Henry Fremont. "Well, neither have I, even though I sat for an interminable three hours last winter watching puffs of steam rise from his mouth."

Justis smiled. It was a fair description of Doctor Ferrule's lectures, one of which he had obediently attended because Doctor St Cloud had told him to. "How does he manage to make a living?" he wondered aloud.

"He doesn't," said Godwin. Everyone stared at him. "He has money of his own," he explained. "He's a relation of ours, on his mother's side. He's

not stupid, he writes books," he went on defensively. "He's the one who wrote the history of the University. And what he doesn't know about the House of Godwin isn't worth knowing."

"Oh," sneered Henry. "Is there anything worth knowing about the House of Godwin?"

Young Peter rose to the bait like a trout, and for a moment it looked as if there might be a scrap. But as Vandeleur prevented Godwin from crawling across the table, Justis came to the end of his train of thought and said, "Then it seems that Doctor St Cloud's only plausible rival is Doctor Crabbe. Whose scholarship is widely known to be more orthodox, and therefore more acceptable to the Governors. He has seniority, as well—almost ten years, isn't that right?"

Everyone nodded.

"However," Vandeleur said, "Crabbe's students are mostly loungers who contribute nothing new to their field. Many of them are nobles, who will not (shut up, Peter, you know they won't) continue in the University. On the other hand, St Cloud has revived interest in an obscure branch of history. There are more of us each month, as the word of his lectures gets out and men from other disciplines come to see what the fuss is about. That has to count for something with the Governors."

They silently tallied up the score so far. Lindley said, "What about those Northern boys who sit up in the gallery at LeClerc? Do they count for or against the Doctor?"

"Oh, them," said Henry Fremont, clearly feeling it was high time he got some attention. "Well, it depends on whether they're University scholars or stray actors from some theatre troupe. Those braids and beads in their hair make them look like they'll start declaiming the king's speech from *Fair Rosamund* or *The Wizard's Revenge* at any moment. Do you think they're taking notes, or are they just up there waiting for Doctor St Cloud to give them their cue?"

Justis remarked, rather wistfully, that he had never seen a play on a real stage; and the talk moved on to theatres and actresses and whether lust for a boy dressed as a girl or a girl playing a boy really counted, and other similar questions that engage the inquiring mind of youth.

THE MAN WHO KILLED THE LAST KING WAS HIS BROTHER-in-law, David, Duke Tremontaine. It was done perfectly legally, through the Rules of Challenge. Thirty-three nobles from the Council of Lords came together and one after another called challenge on King Gerard. As was their right (and, indeed, their duty), the King's Companions accepted each challenge on the king's behalf. But they were a roistering bunch, chosen by the king more for their ability to drink, gamble, and invent clever ways to torture his enemies than for their fighting or diplomatic skills. Some were old men, inherited from his father, mad Hilary the Stag. Their swords were no match for the nobles, who had all been training for some time. One by one they cut down the king's defenders, until the monarch stood alone, facing Tremontaine.

The wizards might have tried to put a stop to this, but they were nowhere to be seen. As soon as the king was dead, they were condemned as well, rounded up and burned along with their books. Their pupils were disbanded, killed, or sent into exile.

What the dead king's sister, the Duke Tremontaine's wife, thought about it all is not recorded. Her husband was the hero of his country, and surely that pleased her.

"HOW DID THE DUKE KEEP THE WIZARDS OUT OF THE way?" Peter Godwin brought up the question with his friends at the Blackbird's Nest after the morning's lecture. It was not a question he would have thought of asking a year ago: everyone knew that Tremontaine had invited all the wizards to a great banquet and locked them in. But according to what they'd been studying with St Cloud lately, the wizards were notorious for knowing everyone's business before they did—"hearing thoughts on the wind," Delgardie poetically put it, which everyone took to mean the wizards had a fabulous network of spies. But did they? If so, who were they? How were they paid? And how had they failed so spectacularly in the end, when it really mattered?

"He was rich," said Henry Fremont in disgust. "Trevor says he bound them in chains of silver and gold—that means money, obviously. The duke

bribed people to keep them out of the way, or give them false information or something."

"Maybe the Council made promises with them to share power, which they never had any intention of keeping."

"Or Tremontaine did it himself, and turned coat at the last minute."

"Oh, it's hopeless!" Vandeleur groaned. "We're just inventing stories, like village wives. How are we ever going to *know* anything?"

"Dig, dig, dig," said Theron Campion cheerfully. "And keep on digging." He'd just come in out of the cold, and his face was flushed and cheerful. "Hello, Vandeleur, sorry you're suffering—you should have stuck to Geography, with me. At least there are maps to consult."

Benedict grinned. "Hello, Campion. I hear you're in Rhetoric now, so don't tell me about maps." He indicated the table. "Do you know these gentlemen?"

Theron nodded politely. "Godwin, Lindley…I'm sure I'd enjoy knowing all of you, but I was just wondering whether anyone had seen Doctor St Cloud?"

"He's never in here anymore," Godwin piped up. "Don't tell me you're thinking of switching to History now!"

"No, I'm enjoying Rhetoric, thanks. Poetry, parts of speech, no dates and no dust."

"Campion *is* History," said Henry Fremont snarkily. He knew perfectly well they'd met at least twice, and that Theron did not remember him. "He's a direct descendant of David, Duke Tremontaine. So tell us, Campion, what's the family secret? You're all so wildly successful. Is it brains? Beauty? Connections? How does a man become a hero to his country by knocking off a close relation?"

Basil would have recognized the way Theron's face went perfectly still when he was asked about his family. In response, Theron simply quoted Redding: "'Inquire of the Dead, O inquire of them; but as they died, their answer will be blood, and blood, and blood again.'"

"Is that conduplicatio?" Vandeleur tried to lighten the mood.

Theron relaxed a little. "Diacope, actually: repetition to express deep feeling. But close, Vandeleur; very close."

A sallow young man at the other end of the table snorted: "Blood is right, Tremontaine. There's enough of it spilt, and enough on your hands.

King Gerard trusted the duke. He'd given him his sister's hand in marriage. He loved him. And what did Tremontaine do? Killed him, that's what. Where I come from, we call that treachery."

A shocked silence ensued, broken by a few uncomfortable chuckles. Even Henry Fremont was speechless, staring with everyone else at the sallow young man. He returned their gaze truculently. Under his scholar's robe, he wore a threadbare doublet that looked old enough to have been his grandfather's. His dun-colored hair hung in a dozen tiny braids around his bony face.

Godwin said, "If that was a joke, Finn, it wasn't a funny one."

It was at that moment that Basil St Cloud entered the Blackbird's Nest.

"Doctor St Cloud!" Peter Godwin called out imperiously. "An interesting question has arisen." His voice broke halfway through the sentence, which, combined with his pomposity, was irresistibly funny to the men at the table. In the lull, St Cloud approached the group. When he saw Theron Campion there, he looked surprised. Campion nodded to him politely, and said, "We're just having a scholarly debate. I expect it will be over soon."

"Well then," St Cloud said formally, "pray do not let me interrupt." And he sat down to listen.

Henry Fremont took this as an opportunity to regain the upper hand and show off. "The question is this: was David, Duke Tremontaine, called the King Killer, a hero to the country and a liberator of his people, or was he a traitor to his king?"

"Rhetorically," Theron answered carefully, "he could be both, since they are two different things. Unless, that is, you consider king and country to be one and the same." The historians nodded. St Cloud had made the same point in a recent lecture. "If I read Hollis correctly, the wizards considered them so, and the kings did, too: for them, the king was the land, and the land was the king. But the nobles did not, and so it follows that the duke could at once be savior to the one and traitor to the other, without a speck of a stain on his noble character."

The Northern boy, Finn, burst in impatiently, "Very pretty, Master Rhetorician." Basil remembered Finn; he'd started coming to lectures three weeks into the term, and paid his student's fee in tarnished old silver coins. "But what would you call a man who murdered his own kin?"

"Well, it depends on why he did it," Theron said coolly. "If his relatives were irritating bores, I'd call him perfectly justified."

People laughed. But Alaric Finn was not to be put off. His sallow, bony face with its small narrowed eyes was like an old boot next to Theron Campion's animal beauty; yet he radiated a fierce passion that compelled attention. "I see," he said. "So much for scholarship, eh, my lord?"

The debate was drawing people across the tavern, including a few other boys who, like Finn, were decorated with those outlandish braids. Basil thought they looked self-consciously antique, like the old tapestries of King Alcuin's Companions.

"It's only what I'd expect," Finn added, "from a man claiming such kin."

One quick retort, and Theron would have the rest of them back on his side. But Finn's words made him catch his breath in anger, and he missed his moment. The other students pulled away, leaving Theron at bay in the middle of an angry pack.

Theron felt it. He slung off his black scholar's robe with showy gallantry. "Hold this for me, Godwin, will you?" Rolling up the white linen of his shirt sleeves, he addressed Finn: "So. You don't like my answers, and you don't like my ancestors. To whom do I have the pleasure of defending their honor?"

The Northern boy shook back his braids. "My name is Alaric Finn. My father is Master Finn of Finnhaven. And I don't take gaff from a Southron whelp who claims kin to the False Duke who did old Gerard down."

Drawn by the smell of a fight, more men were drifting in. A clutch of young nobles, some in scholars' gowns, came up behind Theron. "Calling good old David false, is he? At him, Campion!" It was Lord Sebastian Hemmynge, a student of Geography by day, a haunter of ballrooms by night.

Young Lord Peter Godwin, who'd been drinking more than was good for him in the company of his elders, remembered an old grievance: "Watch it, Hemmynge! Your family got rich enough off Godwin lands after the Fall—"

"A loyalist?" sneered Lord Sebastian. "Isn't it a bit late for that, Godwin?"

Henry Fremont had wisely retreated to the edge of the circle. "Who says history is dead?" he remarked to Anthony Lindley. But Lindley had turned his dense blue eyes on Doctor St Cloud, who was watching the scene with silent abstraction, as though it were all happening off in a foreign country.

The tavernkeeper made his way through the crowd, his knuckles bristling with empty tankards. "Gentlemen, scholars, if you please—" He saw who else was there—"and my lords. None of that in here, *if* you please. Outside, the lot of you. Yes, you! And you, too…No, no, Doctor St Cloud, you stay put, sir—young men will have their studies, every way they can…"

The young men struggled out of doors, cursing and shoving at each other, retreading grievances two hundred years old and more. They formed a circle around Theron Campion and Alaric Finn, while Benedict Vandeleur tried to interpose himself between them.

"Come off it, men!" he reasoned. "Debate if you want to, but don't drag it down to the level of ruffians!"

A noble seized his elbow. "Who are you calling a ruffian?"

Theron, who had learned to fight on the streets of Riverside with boys much tougher than these, threw a punch at Finn's pointed nose, producing a dramatic jet of blood. Finn howled and swung at Theron; but before it could escalate to a free-for-all, Benedict Vandeleur took a happy inspiration from the rules of swordfighting, and shouted "Blood!" at the top of his lungs. "First blood!"

Everyone fell back a step as ancient order moved into place. Although dueling with swords was not a privilege of scholars, they knew what the rules of challenge were.

Vandeleur grabbed the arm of the foremost Northerner, a tall blond youth named Greenleaf, and announced, "We witness first blood to Theron Campion. Campion, are you satisfied?"

Theron looked at Finn, who was trying and failing to stop the bleeding with the back of his hand. One of Basil's students, the delicate redhead Lindley, was kneeling beside him with a handkerchief. "More than satisfied," Theron answered.

"Alaric Finn," Greenleaf asked in turn. "Is the quarrel resolved?"

Finn looked up, his bony face half-masked in blood, pure rage glittering in his deep-set eyes. Vandeleur felt Greenleaf tense, ready to intervene if Finn urged the quarrel on.

But Alaric Finn believed deeply in ritual. "Resolved," he snuffled.

"Resolved," echoed Vandeleur and Greenleaf.

The tension went out of the crowd as if a string had been cut.

The Northerners bore Finn off with Anthony Lindley's handkerchief pressed to his nose. Shaking his head in disgust, Benedict Vandeleur drifted back into the tavern. Henry Fremont caught up with him. "Quick thinking," he said. "You probably want a beer." Which was as close to a compliment as he was likely to come.

Lord Sebastian and his mates had their arms around Theron: "Good on you, Campion—can't let that dirt-boy speak ill of our folk. We're with you—horsewhip the Northern bastard if he shows his face again in the Nest."

"It's nothing," said Theron. His temper had cooled to the point where he couldn't imagine what had gotten into him. He wondered whether Basil, whom he'd been hoping to impress, thought him a quarrelsome fool instead. "He'd probably had too much to drink."

"That's no excuse," said Hemmynge. "Why be a student if you don't know how to drink?"

"It's what *I* came to learn!" added a young scion of the Perrys.

"I'm sure it is," Theron muttered.

"So we'll see you tonight, will we?"

Over their heads, Theron could see the tavern door, and Basil coming out of it, studiously avoiding them all. "Tonight? Where?"

"The Harvest Feast at the Perrys', you rogue!"

"Oh, of course," he said; "wouldn't miss it!" Just that morning, he'd been telling Lady Sophia that he'd rather be hung by his heels down a well than have to face another annual rite of privileged debauch. But he'd known even then he'd have to go. He grinned bleakly as his peers slapped him on the back, then he hurried off to make a roundabout way to Minchin Street, where he prayed that Basil would be waiting.

BASIL WAS WAITING, AND HE DID NOT SEEM TO THINK Theron a quarrelsome fool. He held him tightly, and loosed his hair from its clasp, and tangled his fingers deep in its folds.

"You are remarkable," the historian said. "Did you know that the oldest kings, the Northern kings, were war leaders?"

"Did you know," Theron mocked, "that the tip of your ear is beginning to resemble a delicious ruby? Those damnable Northerners, there's more of

them every year."

Basil held him back at arm's length. "Don't speak that way, Theron. The land is united. It was united almost five hundred years ago, and many good men, and a great queen, as well, worked hard to create a union indissoluble. The kings fell, but the Union did not. Do not you make that division now. If Finn offended you, I'll speak with him."

"Heavens, no! I'll fight my own battles, thank you. Finn—is that his name?—is new here. I'm not. I've been coming to University since I was old enough to hold Sophia's hand and cross the street. I've heard just about everything that anyone can say about the Mad Duke or any other Tremontaine, not to mention women in the lecture hall, women in the surgery, and the getting of foreign whelps. I know how to fight. Now Finn knows that."

Basil said, "Yes. I understand. But perhaps it would be best if we two should meet here. And not at the Nest."

"Yes," Theron breathed in his ear. "I agree. It nearly undid me to see you standing there surrounded by your worshipers."

Basil grinned. "Why don't you come to my lectures, then? Come early enough, and you can watch me from the front row—"

"Right!" Theron launched himself forward enthusiastically. "And we can enact for your students some Living History—pantomimes, like a village ball: King Sebastian and the Wizard Guidry! The Seduction of Mezentian! King Anselm the Wise in the bushes with his favorite groom—ouch!"

"Oh, my lord," said Basil, rising above him. "These are not games for anyone but us. Understand that."

"I do," Theron gasped, knowing the play required an answer. "I was joking."

"Joke with the others," his lover said, "but not with me."

He took Theron with brutal efficiency, and then strung out the boy's pleasure till his lover mewed with frustrated desire. Theron's skin was as rich and dense as the covers of the book, the secret book, the book that he possessed as surely as he possessed this son of the ancient kings. There was nothing he could not do, owning them both. Behind the magister's eyes, wild boys twined ivy in their long, long hair, and words in a lost language danced on the edge of sense.

When they were both done, Basil wasted no time. "Off you get." He swatted Theron's rump. "I've a lecture to prepare for tomorrow, and the Governors' Harvest Supper is tonight."

Theron groaned. "I, too, have obligations."

"I weep for you." Basil was already up and dressing. He felt invigorated, ready to write his whole book in one night.

Theron reached out his naked arms. "Let me stay here. I'll be very quiet."

Basil chuckled. "I know you." He felt the power of sex tingle throughout his whole body. He loved the fastidiousness of his dry clothing against his still-damp skin, while he gazed on his naked, impossibly beautiful lover, stretched out yearning for him on the bed. "Come back," Basil said a little huskily, "tomorrow, after my class. I'll have plenty of time for you then."

AFTER THE FIGHT, THE NORTHERNERS BORE FINN OFF to The Green Man. Situated in the cellar of a lecture hall, the tavern was small, damp, and even darker than the Blackbird's Nest. But its cider was decent, its owner was Northern-born, and a man could air his opinions there without worrying about some Southron noble taking offense at hearing the truth.

Greenleaf dropped onto a wooden settle by the fire. "Bring us cider, Wat, and a key to put down young Finn's back. Harvest's not the time for blood."

His friends heard this pronouncement with solemn deference. Roland Greenleaf was First Companion, Master of the Hunt and Keeper of the Mysteries in the Southlands. He knew things about the rituals of the seasons that none of the rest of them knew, except maybe Smith, who was Second Companion. Greenleaf was the son of an ancient family descended from the seed of kings, as all the oldest Northern families were, and as proud of his lineage as any duke. The white bars on his gown-sleeves proclaimed him a Fellow of the College of Law.

"That's the last time I ever set foot in the Blackbird's Nest," Smith said. "Historians! Fancy themselves, don't they, pissing on the kings and the wizards. They'd give a lot to know what we know, eh, boys?"

"They would," Finn snuffled through the clotted mess of Lindley's handkerchief. "Don't be so hard on them, Smith; you should come hear St

Cloud lecture one of these days. He gets awfully close sometimes."

"That's as may be," Greenleaf said solemnly. "He's welcome to all that any man knows, North or South. But hearken, Finn: you know as well as I do that the Inner Mysteries are for none but our brotherhood. If ever I discover that you've breathed a word of them outside, whether it be in season or out of season, the Land will drink of your blood."

Wat brought a pitcher of cider and a large iron key, which Greenleaf picked up and dropped without ceremony down the neck of Finn's shirt. Finn gasped and twitched. Miraculously, the flow of blood stopped.

"Cheer up," said Smith. "It's Harvest Night, and a full moon at dusk. Time to encourage the rabbits and deer, eh? Is your Horn ready? I know mine is!" He was a large, bluff youth, thick as a northland oak, and even coarser grained.

Finn managed a smile. "Had I the power of the Horn in me, I'd have beaten that Campion."

"Don't be a fool," Greenleaf said wearily. "For all his titles and his land, Campion was raised in Riverside. He could have killed you. You serve Northern honor better by keeping your tongue between your teeth just now. We all do."

The Companions nodded. Ever since that lunatic Bloodwood had come down from Harden and set the city by the ears with his public demand for the restoration of the monarchy, they'd been treading carefully. You saw things differently, living down South. The kings were gone, and the wizards with them. What they'd left behind was mighty, though, mightier than these soft Southerners understood, or needed to. Tonight, the Companions would call up the shadows of the ones who had gone before. Crowned with horn, they would dance them into being, and take their pleasure with one another, as the Companions had done from time immemorial.

chapter X

THERON CONSIDERED THE EVENING BEFORE HIM with an eye to whether he should start drinking now or when he got there. The Perry Harvest Feast wasn't the only one in town, but it was the biggest and best and most prestigious, so of course Theron had been invited. He was, after all, heir presumptive to the Duchy of Tremontaine. His mother and the duchess had received invitations, too, but Sophia said that Harvest was one of the liveliest nights in Riverside and she needed to be on hand for the burn cases and the knife wounds. Katherine had taken a fancy to go down to her estates at Fernway and celebrate there in country style—or so she said. She had taken Diana and the new baby with her.

So Theron was left to face the Perry crowd alone. Lord Perry's was the largest and most traditional of the private Harvest feasts. There would be a bonfire, and dolls made of straw from the harvest's end, shuttled down from the Perry country estates, to be thrown into it. It all seemed ridiculous, to keep such country customs in the city, but since the autumn Season had begun, no noble family with any pretension to style would be caught dead in the country, so they observed the practice here in town. The Perrys had a very large courtyard where a fire could safely be lit without danger to the shrubbery.

And because the Perrys were an old Northern family, there would be the Stag Dance, usually performed by homesick farm boys who'd come to find work in the city, re-creating the customs of home: holding up branches of horn as they leapt in rhythm to the eerie notes of a pipe and tabor, clashing the stags' horns together and leaping apart.

After the mock fight of the Stag Dance came a real fight, performed by professionals with sharpened steel. The Perrys always hired the best-known swordsmen for their feast, and guests who usually saved their money for the

card tables had been known to lose it all in one bet on the outcome of the Harvest duel.

Interspersed with all this, there would be dancing, and enough food to feed a village for a week, and red wine sweetened with honey and cloves, which made it go down so smooth that even generally abstemious people inevitably drank too much.

And of course, it being the opening weeks of the Season, there would be bevies of fresh young ladies being presented to adult society as potential mates for its sons and heirs.

Theron decided that the earlier he arrived, the earlier he could leave. That way, he'd get the food and the bonfire, and miss the dancing and the debauchery. He had nothing against debauchery in the abstract, but he was particular about the details. In addition to its other splendors, the Perry Harvest Feast was an evening renowned for the pleasures it afforded unmarried young men. Once they had done their polite duty by the daughters of their mothers' friends, dancing country dances and fetching them honeyed wine, they moved on to stronger stuff. Their blood heated by drink and flame and the spectacle of men fighting with ritual horns and actual steel, their subsequent pursuits were heated as well.

Mothers knew that the Perry feast was the one to be seen at, but they also knew to hustle their daughters home after the swordfight. A girl who stayed too long at the Perrys' on Harvest Night got a reputation for being fast.

Theron hastened home to Riverside before sunset, had Terence shave him, and put on a nice clean shirt and a very good suit of dark green wool shot with silk, which, Terence pointed out, hadn't seen action since the Lassiter girl's Birthday Ball. That must be why he hadn't been wearing it, Theron reflected; it was a very nice suit, but it had been a very trying ball. He had been besieged by marriageable daughters whose mothers had told them that the Tremontaine heir liked poetry. He'd escaped to the card room, where he ended up losing a great deal of money because he did not play cards very well. He always drank too much at these affairs, and he tended to lose the ability to add and subtract when he'd been drinking.

And so he set out, wearing a fur-collared coat, heavy boots, gloves, and a broad-brimmed hat in case of rain. The sun was setting out over the river in a glorious scarlet display and the evening breeze was sharp and chill. At a

brazier by the bridge, he fired up the torch he'd brought from home, and lit himself up the well-known streets.

An hour later he arrived at the Perrys with the rest of the early guests. He was divested of his outer things and escorted to a dressing room where he could change into indoor shoes and have a man brush out his hair. Terence had fastened it with a gold ribbon. Terence knew about these things.

He shared the dressing room with one of his cousins, Charlie Talbert. They had gone to children's parties together at Tremontaine House, because the duchess believed in doing right by her brothers' families and making sure for Sophia's sake that Theron was always included in normal activities despite their unorthodox life. Theron and Charlie had little in common; but both had been well brought up, and Charlie knew that Theron was likely to be the head of the family some day. So he greeted him affably, "Theron! Good to see you! Happy Harvest and all that. Don't worry about being bored—thing is, there's to be *a* real fight, a decent fight, out in the garden after the Stag Dance. Rupert and Filisand are finally going at it."

"What's the quarrel?" Theron asked.

It was Charlie's turn to be caught short: clearly it was unthinkable to him that anyone in their circle should be without this piece of intelligence. But he was polite enough not to say so. "It's like this," he explained. "Rupert kicked Filisand's horse before the first go at Penning—or at least, that's what Rowland says—if you can believe him. I mean, everyone knows Rupe's sister gave him the one-up at Karleigh with a vengeance, so he had a bee in his roses, if you catch my drift. Not that it matters. The horse thing stands—it's a done thing, what with Penning clearly having gone to Rowland anyway. So what else could Filisand do? He sent challenge right after the White Rose Ball—you were there, weren't you? Well, the fight would have to wait 'til summer's end, when everybody's back, you know—and didn't that give Rupert time to sweat! See, the thing is, he has no idea who Fill's hired to fight! And none of Fili's friends are talking, either. Good man to trust with a secret. Not like some—anyway. Thing is, here's poor Rupers stuck with no idea what to spend on a sword: does he waste his allowance on the best man in town, just to blood some poor hack of Fili's? Or does he go for a hack himself—a stylish hack, mind you—nobody ever

faulted Rupe for style—but a wedding-and-flowers sort of fellow—and risk seeing his nose cut off by a fancy blade of Fili's?"

The amazing thing, Theron thought, was that he understood almost everything his cousin was saying. Except about the horses, which didn't really matter. He just couldn't bring himself to take an interest in riding or racing. Swordsmanship he knew: the duchess had seen to it that he had several years of lessons, as she had herself—but unlike her, he hadn't kept it up. And he did not particularly enjoy watching other people's fights.

"Wonderful!" he said, bright as new silver. "I'll try and make it."

Charlie gave him the *I can't believe I just heard that* look that he knew so well.

Theron beamed even more brightly at him. "Where are the drinks?"

An hour later, his smile was beginning to slip. "I wish this were a masked ball," he told a nice girl whom he had offered to fetch flower water for.

She looked as if she were going to cry.

"Oh!" he said, realizing what he'd done in time, he hoped, to catch it. "Not because of you. Because of me. All this smiling. Don't you find it tiring? I do!"

"Aren't you having a good time?" she asked in a small voice.

"Oh, splendid," he was forced to say; "with you."

He fetched her drink and danced with her twice, and then it was time for the Harvest Fire and the Stag Dance. Baskets of little woven dolls passed amongst the guests. "Close your eyes!" his partner squeaked; "close your eyes and pick one!" Theron reached into the basket, and pulled out a figure with a crown. "Oh, look," she said; "you've drawn the King!"

He held it up to the light. "A Little King. I wonder which one he is? A good one or a bad one?"

"Weren't they all bad?"

"No, lady; not all."

She looked at him as if he'd farted, and then waved to a friend: "Look, Amalie, Lord Theron's drawn the King!"

The other girl came up with her escort. "That's so lucky. All I've got is a Companion."

"Me, too. Too bad."

"In the ancient times, the King's Companions were all possible kings," Theron explained kindly, remembering something he'd read in Hollis. "It

wasn't until the Trial that the king was chosen from amongst them. So maybe yours will yet be a king, Lady Amalie."

She was giving him that look now, but only for a moment—then she changed it to an expression of wide-eyed interest. (He could imagine her practicing in front of a mirror until she got it right in time for her first ball.) "I never knew that. About Companions. Where could I learn more about it?"

"I read it in Hollis's history of the North. But there's a better book being worked on by a man I'm studying with, a Doctor of Ancient History at University."

The young lord escorting her broke in: "Ancient history—ancient *heresy* if you ask me! Kings and wizards." He made a face. "Best forgotten."

"Ooh," squealed Lady Amalie, "history—all those dates. I never could keep them all straight. That's something you men are so much better at."

After this exchange, Theron had little stomach for the bonfire and less for the Rupert/Filisand swordfight. He gave his straw king to his partner to throw into the fire, earning a smile and a melting look he didn't in the least deserve, and bowed himself away. Feeling hunted, he slipped from the ballroom to the refreshment table, where he procured a glass of wine and a cheese tart, and went in search of an empty room.

He thought he'd found it in the library; but when he peeked around the door, he saw a girl sitting at the library table, her braids brushing the surface of a large book as she read. She looked up before he could retreat and said, "Oh. Hello. Did you want somewhere to hide, too? You can come in if you like; nobody ever comes here."

She was still a child, really, podgy and uncomfortable-looking in a little girl's stiff party dress with too many ruffles. Theron hesitated, then shut the door and sat down opposite her.

"What's that?" she asked, eyeing his provender with interest.

Theron broke the tart in half and held it out invitingly. "It's cheese. Do you want some?"

She reached for it, retreated, blushed, shook her head unhappily. "Mama wouldn't like it," she said.

"Whyever not?" Theron asked, amused.

"It's not manners to take people's food," she informed him. "Besides, I'm too fat."

Theron laughed. “Half a cheese tart won’t make any difference. And your mama need never know. Take it.” They sat for a little in companionable silence, chewing, and then Theron said, “I didn’t know the Perrys had a daughter your age.”

“I am not a Perry,” the girl said, rather indignantly. “But my mother is—on her mother’s side. One of my sisters is actually *named* Perry. We’re visiting. That’s why I’m at the party. Really, I’m too young.”

“What’s your name?” Theron asked.

“Frannie—Francesca, really. What’s yours?”

“Theron—Alexander, really. But it was my father’s name, so I don’t use it.”

She thought this over. “May I have it, then?”

“What, Alexander?”

“Yes, I like it. I think it is an excellent name, and if you really don’t want it, I’d like to have it.”

“You’d look a bit funny as an Alexander.”

Frannie blushed and fidgeted with her braid. “It’s not for me. It’s for a… friend. Well, not an actual person. Something I’m writing.”

“So you’re a writer,” Theron said. She looked at him defiantly. He recognized that look—he wore it himself, still, when cornered into admitting he wrote poetry. The worst thing to do would be to smile; the second worst to tell her he was a writer, too. “Good,” he said. “What are you writing about?”

The defiant look slipped through astonishment into eagerness. “An adventure,” she confided. “There’s going to be a swordsman in. I had planned to sneak out and watch, although Mama has expressly forbidden it. But now I think it is just as nice in here. Anyhow, my grandfather says that swordsmen aren’t what they were. Did you ever see any of the good ones?”

Theron was about to object that he wasn’t anywhere near as old as her grandfather, who might well have seen the likes of Harding, or even St Vier—but then he stopped. Richard St Vier had been his father’s first and most famous lover. The house that Theron lived in had originally been his father’s idea of a joke: an urban palace in Riverside, built outward from the crumbling old house he had inhabited with Richard.

Because of this, people sometimes expected Theron to be more than a little interested in swordsmen. Because of this, he had scrupulously avoided

them. But, in fact, Theron had seen Richard St Vier.

"Yes," he told Francesca. "When I was a little boy. I used to wake up at night, when the moon was bright, because I could hear thudding on the wall. Like one very heavy drop of rain, paced and regular; it would keep up for a while, and then stop, and then start up again, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. One night, I got up to see where it was coming from. I followed the sound to a room down the hall. The windows were open. It was full of moonlight. And I saw a man practicing the sword against the wall, striking it over and over. That's what the thumping was. I didn't recognize him. My mother doesn't keep swordsmen—not active ones, anyway. I didn't say anything, and he didn't notice me; he just kept on practicing."

"It might have been a visitor."

"It might. We often have people staying with us. But here's the strange thing. When I went back to the room the next day, there were all sorts of chairs and tables and things that hadn't been there the night before—in fact, it was a room I knew perfectly well."

Frannie tightened her arms around herself. "Who was it?" she breathed.

"I finally asked my mother. At first she didn't answer. Then she told me that it was someone who'd lived in the house long ago, and who liked to come back sometimes; and that it was all right with her, so I was not to bother him."

The girl snorted. "Well, at least she told you that much. I hope you asked the servants."

He grinned. "I did. I asked my nurse. She knew right away. St Vier, she said. The greatest swordsman who ever lived. That's who it had to be."

"Oh my gosh! Did you go back?"

"I think so. I must have."

"How can you not remember?" she asked scornfully.

"Because it was like a dream. The moonlight, and the man, and me standing in the doorway…I can remember watching him, but it all seems like one long dream. I didn't hear him every night. Sometimes I thought I'd made it up, but then it would start again. I wanted to go find him one time because I wanted to ask him to come round in the day for once and take care of some boys outside who always made me play skellies with them but they made me put in two for their one." She made a sympathetic noise.

"But either I didn't go, or I didn't speak to him when I did. Maybe I got better at skellies and forgot."

"Do you still hear him?"

"No. I haven't heard him in years."

She shivered deliciously. "I'd give anything to see a ghost. In the day, anyway. I will put one in my book. Not a swordsman, though, or people will think I stole it from you."

"Actually, not. I've never told anyone but you."

"After your mother and your nurse."

"Just so."

A smile lit on her face like a moth, dusty and fragile and not very beautiful, but alluring in its fragility.

"Are you sure you're really a man?" she blurted out unexpectedly.

Theron laughed, unoffended. "I'm sure. But you're not?"

"You don't talk like my brothers or my father," she explained. "And there's your hair. Men don't have long hair."

"University men do. It's a badge of honor."

"Mama says University is a very wicked place that encourages young men in bad habits." She propped her elbows on the open book. "Do you have bad habits?"

"Of course not—well, yes, I suppose your mama would think so. They're not very bad, or very interesting, and I won't tell you about them, so don't bother asking."

"I didn't think you would," said Frannie resignedly. "Are you married?"

"No," said Theron, surprised. "I'm not."

"Would you like to be?"

"I don't—no. Not just now."

"Why not?"

Why not? He thought for a moment, and another moment. Patiently, she waited, because she really wanted to know. He thought of all the things that were possibly true. But to tell them to the little girl, he would have to talk about very tedious adult things like duty and responsibility. While she might sympathize, she probably got enough of that at home already.

Trying to be helpful, Frannie suggested, "Maybe you just haven't met the right one yet."

Theron thought, But I have. And then he knew what to tell her: "I'm in love with someone else. Someone I can't marry."

She sighed with a romantic's innocent relish. "Oh my *gosh*—that is just *tragic*!" Shyly: "Would you like to tell me about it?"

"So you can write about it? No." Her face registered her disappointment. To keep himself from laughing aloud, Theron asked, "What about you?"

"I don't think I actually will get married. I am not clever or pretty, or good at sums or sewing. All I can do is make up stories, and that won't get you a husband." She spoke with absolute certainty.

"It would if he liked stories," Theron pointed out.

"Stories are for babies," she intoned fiercely, a lesson she had been forced to memorize. "Children like stories. Men don't like stories."

"Some do. And there's history—that's all stories, and men study them for years at University."

"Yes, but they're *true*! That's so utterly, utterly different." She hid her face in her hands, and he realized that he had in some way managed to betray her after all. He wished that he had not.

She mastered herself, and straightened, holding out her hand across the book. "It's been delightful to meet you, Theron—Lord Theron, I mean. I hope you pass a pleasant evening."

He bowed and said, "And you, Lady Francesca. I wish you all success with your work." He won a smile from her, and said impulsively, "In a few years, when your hair is up and you are presented to society, I hope that you will send me an invitation to your first dance. My name is Alexander Theron Tielman Campion, at your ladyship's service."

THE THOUGHT OF THIS GIRL BEING LACED INTO corsets and put on the market in three years or four depressed Theron utterly. He wondered if her mother and sisters would have drummed all the "nonsense" about stories out of her head before then, or if she would continue to perplex her dinner partners by talking about it. He didn't know which fate was kinder to wish on her. He had the impulse to call on Sophia to rescue this girl, as she so often rescued street orphans and kitchen drudges from poverty. But poverty of spirit was not the same, was it? He himself had fought it successfully,

making a life for himself that satisfied the needs of his mind and his spirit, despite opposition from his cousin and his peers. But the odds faced by Sophia's son were not the same as those facing a nobleman's daughter.

He stood outside the door and considered fetching some sweet cakes and sugared almonds to bring Frannie as an offering. But she had closed the door with such gentle finality, like a queen indicating that the interview was at an end.

So Theron reentered the ballroom and passed beyond it to where the young men were sharing whiskey in a corner of the conservatory, and entered the community of bad boys drinking, which required very little conversation, polite or otherwise. There was the Randall heir, young Clarence, and Sebastian Hemmynge, who attended geography lectures when he was sober, Ralph Perry, the son of the house, and Tom Deverin, down for his first Season in the city. Theron shoved Deverin aside on the stone bench, accepted the bottle of whiskey, and took a numbing mouthful.

Clarence Randall rose, knocking over a potted fern. "'D better get back in there," he said. "M'mother'll want to know where I am."

"Oh, hell, Randall, don't be such a pussy boy," said Hemmynge. "Stop looking for your mama; let's go out and look for some *real* women."

"You insulting my mother, Hemmynge?" Randall was a handsome boy, with powerful shoulders and muscular legs. This was his first city Season, and it showed.

"Lord, no. I am spefic—spec*if*ically not insulting her by not lumping her with the sort of woman one goes out and finds in—in our condition."

"I'm not drunk," said Randall inaccurately. "*You* may be drunk, but I'm not drunk."

"Nobody said you were drunk," soothed Deverin.

"Not drunk. Randy!" chortled Hemmynge. "Look here—I am a Scholar of the University." He smoothed his fair hair, which fell loose below his shoulders.

"What's that got to do with the state of your dick?" Perry razzed.

"Shut up, Perry. I'm *explaining* it to you. Because last year, St Cloud explained it all to us. About the Harvest time. It's when they killed the king."

"By god, you're right!" said Randall. "My great-great-something—yours, too, Campion, and probably Perry's as well—did kill the king in the fall. I

may not be a *Scholar of the University*, but I do know that!"

"You don't know jack," said Hemmynge. "Duke David killed him in the spring. That's why we have Spring Festival, idiot!"

Theron took another drink to stop himself from giggling. They were not so bad, these fellows. Really, they were not.

"Anyway, it symbolized something," Hemmynge went on. "Sex, that's what it was. We must go out and prove the rods of our potent manhood—give our seed to the land, for the good of the harvest!"

Deverin put his rose satin arm around Theron. "You go ahead. I'm going to stay here and prove my rod with Campion, eh, Theron?"

"No." Theron slid away. "I'm going to go, too."

"I thought you didn't—"

"Oh, get the hayseed out of your ears, Tom!" Hemmynge howled. "The lady artist, remember?"

Theron shoved the bottle at him to shut him up. It worked.

"All right, then." Randall drew himself up. "If we're going, let's go."

"Let's go," echoed Deverin, a little doubtfully. "Who's going?"

They pulled together into a ragged group. "So where to? Fat Madge's?"

"I can't go to Madge's," Perry objected. "I've got a girl there who thinks she owns me."

"Hey, Theron," said Hemmynge. "Take us down to Riverside, I hear there are great girls cheap in Riverside."

There were. And some of the ones who came to Sophia for abortions or cups of tea even used to demand when he was going to bring them some of his rich friends for trade. But Theron said, "It's too far. And it's raining."

"What about the girls in the kitchen, then?" Hemmynge persisted. "Maybe they'd like a little tickle."

"Maybe my mother would kill me," said Perry indignantly. "What kind of a house do you think we keep?"

"Well, then, it's Madge's," Randall concluded. "Don't worry, Ralph, I'll keep your girl occupied!"

They poured out into the rainy street, their cloaks pulled tight against the wet. They passed other revelers, their torches sputtering. Theron was enjoying himself—there was something to be said for just going out drinking and having a good time with people.

At Fat Madge's, the tables were laden with harvest fruit and quaint earthenware jugs of wine and little figures woven of straw into shapes that left no question of the purpose of the festivities. The room was crowded; plenty of people were out for a good time tonight. Theron switched from whiskey to wine and ate grapes and watched his friends pick out girls. "What about you?" a big woman kept asking him, but he waved her away like a fly. Like a fly she kept coming back, and finally she said, "You like a boy, then? I got a nice boy, he'll be down in a minute. Or two." She guffawed.

Theron said politely, "Thank you, I've already got one."

Madge laughed. "I'll just bet you do, sweeting. You sit here and give me a cuddle, and we'll come to what you like."

She engulfed his lap with her huge presence and layers of skirts. The woman smelt like rising dough. Her breasts were huge and soft, and he nibbled them experimentally.

"She loves you, Theron!" Hemmynge roared.

At the next table, a man with his long hair in a dozen thin braids laughed and said, "She always treats the new boys thus. Wait 'til she gets to know you!"

Madge wiggled into Theron's lap. "Now don't say you don't like me," she cooed, "when I can *feel* you do!"

"I'd never contradict a lady," Theron said breathlessly.

"Aren't you the polite one?" she said. "Seeing as how you're new here, and pretty besides, I'm going to give you a little sample for hospitality." Under the huge volume of her skirts, she felt expertly for his breeches, and unfastened them, and arranged very neatly for him to sample her wares.

When he sat back, spent, she played with his hair, which had somehow come out of its gold ribbon. "A learned gentleman, for sure. Do you have any money in your purse to buy me a cup of wine or a harvest token?"

Theron felt for his purse and found—nothing. It was gone, and he didn't know how it had happened, or when. He felt a rising flush of shame and fury. He was a Riverside boy: brought up amongst sharps and former pickpockets, he knew all the tricks, and where to keep his money safe. No one ever, ever had slipped his purse before, not in Riverside, nowhere. And here in this "respectable establishment" he'd been had.

"It's you!" he roared, ignoring the fact that Madge would hardly have drawn attention to his purse if she'd lifted it. "You whoring thief—thieving whore—"

He was shouting, and a couple of big men were hustling him out the door. He struggled, and cursed, but they did not seem to care. He skidded on the wet street, soaking his knees in a slimy puddle. A linkboy came rushing forward with a smoky torch. "I don't have any money," Theron said —but as the boy turned away, he remembered: "No, wait, I've got money at home."

"Yeah, you and your sister."

"I haven't got a sister, you punk. Light me home to Riverside, and I'll pay you when we get there."

The boy spat. "You nuts? I don't go there."

"Just give me the damn torch, then."

"For no money? Right, asshole."

Theron stood stupidly while the boy disappeared down an alley. It was black as the inside of a pig's intestines, and cold and wet.

But if he started off downhill, eventually he would come to the river, and then he could find the bridge to Riverside. Which he did, staggering rubber-legged to his private door as the sky was beginning to lighten. He found his key in another pocket, and so saved himself the indignity of having to rouse the house to let him in. There was nothing he could do about the ruined breeches—he just left them on the floor for Terence to find, and hoped that Terence would have mercy and not comment in the morning.

chapter XI

THE NEXT WEEK IT SNOWED, THE FIRST SNOW OF the season. Dirty gray roofs and carvings collected fluffy white trimmings, like fur on an old robe. Basil lay in his low bed under the eaves holding Theron in his arms. Theron was mildly feverish from a cold. The fire was built up and every piece of clothing Basil owned was piled on the bed.

"This is so nice," Theron murmured. "No one's ever held me when I was sick—not since I was a child, I mean." He coughed and sniffled. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

Basil tightened his arm around Theron's chest. "In Anselm's day, physicians believed that the bodily humors must be balanced, cold against hot, dry against moist. It's all nonsense, of course. We know better now."

"The greatest School of Physic in the civilized world—believe me, I know exactly what we know now. Or at least, I'm closely related to one who does. You have no idea, Basil, what it's like to have famous parents."

Basil nodded ruefully. "I do know. My father was famous throughout four villages for his rages."

"You come from the country?"

"You know that."

"No," said Theron. "I thought you'd sprung full-grown from the University clock tower."

Basil touched the thin, sensitive lips. "Hush, if you want to hear. I grew up on a farm outside of Highcombe." He felt a flash of irritable pride. "My father's the cock."

Theron heaved himself up on one elbow. "The *what?*"

"The cock of the village, the man everyone comes to for advice. He's got a fair amount of power, my father, in his way."

Theron flopped down again, laughing. “The mayor’s son. I’m sleeping with the mayor’s son.”

“You could say that, yes. My father would like that, to be called mayor of Highcombe.”

“I’ve been there,” said Theron. “Highcombe is mine—I hold it in my own right. There’s not much of the Tremontaine lands that are actually mine, not yet, but that is. My father deeded it to me.” He rolled to face Basil and gripped his shoulder, grinning from ear to ear. “How would it be, if we rode to Highcombe together, visiting my property side by side with you as my companion?”

Basil shook his head vehemently. “No. Under no circumstances. Never.”

“Why not?” Theron cajoled. “Your father would be proud of you.”

“My father would have apoplexy. Theron, my father wanted me to be a lawyer. That’s why he sent me to University. I was to return to our farm with a thorough knowledge of the law, at the service of the St Cloud family fortunes—so we could weasel our way around the duchess’s rules and tariffs, I expect”—he smiled wryly—“and add to our holdings and my sisters’ husbands’ holdings and in general to increase and prosper. I fell in love with the dead kings instead.”

“No profit in that,” said Theron wisely.

Basil sighed. “That’s right. No profit in that. My father would kill me if he knew we were lovers. He hates Tremontaine almost as much as he hates the University.”

Theron collected him into his arms. “Your father doesn’t want you to love me. But my father wanted me to love you. And mine outranks yours.”

The light, precise voice sounded unbearably smug. Basil shook off his lover and swung himself out of the bed.

“What?” came Theron’s plaintive voice behind him. “What did I say?”

“Your father—your dead father—lived off the fees my father paid him for the privilege of plowing and sowing and harvesting his land. As *you* live off those fees, if I understand you correctly.” He snatched up a shirt—Theron’s, he realized as it strained across his shoulders.

“I suppose I do,” said Theron helplessly. “I’m sorry.”

“It amuses you, doesn’t it?” Basil went on, flinging the shirt back on the bed. “Having a base-born lover, someone who can adore you and be

flattered by your attentions, like the poor fools Hilary commanded into his bed?"

Theron was sitting up now, naked among the bed-clothes, his skin flushed and damp, his long hair clinging to his body like a second vine. "Oh, Basil, I never thought…I'm sorry. Look, I never knew until this moment who your father was, and I don't care. You're a magister, a full Doctor of the University: here, you outrank me." He held out a white hand. "I admire you. I've said so. Don't you know I mean it?"

Basil stared down at him. He could see it all so clearly. This boy did not know him. He did not even know himself.

Theron started coughing again. He pulled the blankets up around himself, shaken with his hacking. Silently, Basil came in with him, and held him and warmed him. He handed him a cup of water, and held him while he drank it. "Lie down," Basil said. "I was wrong. You are not Hilary: not mad, not cruel, none of those things. You are Roland, the poet; you are Orlando the Fair; you are Tybald who died on the field of Pommery; and Alexander, your namesake, who died for love, died as a stag in spring."

Theron whimpered in his arms, "No. Stop it. You're making this up. I am none of those men."

"You are of their line, you carry their seed in you."

Theron tried to stop his mouth with kisses, but Basil pulled away. "Listen to me." He pinned Theron flat with his weight, gripping his wrists hard enough to feel the long bones under the flesh. "Now you will listen," Basil hissed, the words sharp between his teeth. "Do not deny me. I smell it in you, the blood of kings; I taste it on your skin, pounding in your veins; I hear it roaring through your heart."

Half-angry, half-laughing, Theron struggled under him. "If you keep talking treason," he panted, "I'll tell the Council on you."

"Be silent!"

Theron opened his mouth, his breath coming hard, but he made no answer. His eyes were closed like a dreamer's, moving under the thin eyelids. Basil kissed them, and kissed him where the bronze-dark hair sprang back from his temples. "Ah," Theron gasped. "It's so strange! It's all green leaves now—"

"Yes," Basil breathed. "Go on."

"And I'm running—I'm running—"

"Run to me," urged Basil.

"I'm trying—I see—but I can't find—"

But Basil knew what he could see; he saw it, too, and felt it through him: the leaves on the trees, clear as coursing water, clear as the leaves that flashed on Theron's chest. The men with the banners, the bark on the trees, the moss underfoot, and the almost unbearable pleasure of the course to be run, the transformation turned back on itself through terrible knowledge…"Run to me, Little King," Basil whispered, and Theron said, "Not now, not yet, I'm not ready—"

"Now!" Basil said, and it was finished, in a high, clear cry like a wounded animal's.

Basil laid Theron's head on his breast.

For a time, the only sound in the room was the hushed crackle of the fire and the lovers' slowing breaths. "Was that you?" Theron said dreamily. "You seemed like someone else. Frightening. Exciting."

Basil thought of his body burning with infinite power, shot through with white lightning. "It wasn't me," he said; "it didn't feel like me."

"It was you." Theron snuggled into his arms. "Wonderful. Pure sensation. You make me forget everything: who I am, who I'm supposed to be. Like magic."

DEEP IN THE NIGHT, BASIL TURNED HIS HEAD restlessly on his pillow. In his dream, he was thirsty for the water he heard as a bright thread through the dark. As he lifted his hands, he felt leathery leaves against them, flat and smooth and armed with spines. Holly leaves, he thought, and a space opened around him, filled with dim green light and the scent of water.

He was in a whispering, shadowy cave of oak and holly. There was no water in it, only a flat gray stone and a sword of antique design, a wooden cup, and a long, triangular blade that was sharp all along its length, with no handle to protect the wielder from its edges.

Basil took up the cup and walked to the far wall, which opened as he approached into a leafy tunnel. His cloak dragged behind him, catching on the spiny walls, rustling the dead leaves under his sandaled feet.

The Little King was holding vigil as he'd been instructed, squatting patiently by the sacred pool. Hearing footsteps, he dropped to his knees and bowed his head so that his many braids brushed his clean-shaven cheeks. He looked smaller than he ought, slighter, younger. But then he was kneeling and afraid—they all looked younger, kneeling. Basil held out his hand. His hand was broad and ruddy and heavy with gold rings. Basil wondered at this, and opened his mouth to voice his wonder. But the words came out quite differently than he intended, and the voice in which he uttered them was not his at all.

"Will you drink, Little King?"

"If you offer me the cup, I must drink, must I not?"

"If you wish to rule, you must."

The boy lifted his eyes, green as new leaves. "Will I rule, then?"

"You will rule."

The boy accepted the cup, dipped it into the pool, and lifted it dripping to his lips. When he'd drained it, he wiped his mouth on his wrist. "They say all kings are mad," he remarked.

Basil took the cup from him and dipped water for himself. "They are right," he said. "But you must remember that madness is a gift of the land. You will never come to harm as long as I am here to guide you." He touched his lips to the edge of the cup, smelled a thick, sharp tang, as of metal or blood, and woke to cold darkness, the smell of sex, and Theron's gentle snoring beside him. The next time he woke, it was midmorning, and Theron was sitting up in bed beside him, drinking from a wooden cup.

"I feel better," Theron said. "The fever's broken."

Basil seized the cup from him, drained it, then wrestled him down, entering his mouth with kisses until he felt his body's yielding. When Theron lay warm and satisfied across him, he breathed in their mingled scent and felt perfectly happy. Basil could hear the smile in Theron's voice as he said, "I wish I spoke a hundred languages, to tell you how much I love you."

The pleasure of the moment snapped. "Don't say that. Don't say you love me."

"Why not?"

"Because that is something that should not be said between your father's son and mine."

"God!" Theron swore, and flopped back on the pillows. "Enough about my father! Not from you, too; I can't bear it. My mother thinks he was a saint; my duchess cousin thinks he was a satyr. I am what I am—no more, no less—and I would very much appreciate it if you could all stop measuring me against dead dukes I've never even met!"

Basil thought about trying to explain to Theron how much what he was—noble, bright, thoughtlessly endowed with all the riches man and nature could rain on him—made the idea of love between them as impossible as roses at MidWinter. It would be as useless as it was cruel, he decided. Theron did not understand who he truly was.

"I've offended you," Basil said gently. "I'm sorry."

Theron was silent long enough for Basil to wonder whether Theron's love had not survived the declaration. Then Theron said, "When you ask a girl to dance three times at a single ball, it means you're serious about her. It's the same with this: you can't make love with someone three times and not fall in love."

Basil shifted uncomfortably. "You make it sound like a magic spell: three times and you're caught."

"It would depend on the timing, I suppose." His lover gave the question his full attention. "Three times in one year would be safe, but three times in a week, or even a month, and you can't help falling in love."

Basil said, "You're confusing the body with the heart."

"People do, you know." Theron raised himself on one elbow. "But I'm willing to entertain the notion that you have them neatly divided. Maybe for you it takes something more direct." His fingers made an elaborate pass over Basil's face.

Before he could complete it, Basil caught his wrist and pulled him down into his arms. "Don't, Theron. It's not something to joke about."

"Are you going to cry me to the Council for practicing magic? Even though my spells don't work?"

"You have no need of spells."

"It's you who are magic, Basil, you who are the wizard. Who could resist the enchantment of your curling hair, your neck, your broad chest and narrow hips, your—"

"Stop!" Basil was laughing as Theron descended on each admired feature, while he struggled to get away. Then the University bell struck

three times.

Theron yelped, jumped out of bed, and began diving for his scattered clothes. "My mother! I promised to escort her to an exceedingly dreary salon held by a woman she thinks might give her some money toward the women's mathematics chair."

Basil found Theron's stockings and his belt. "Will you come back tonight?"

"Without fail. It may be latish—I'll probably dine with her. But I'll come to you afterward, and I'll stay, Basil, I'll stay. I want to sleep with you and wake with you, night after night and day after day."

"Yes," said Basil, although he knew it was not the right answer. He knew it, and he didn't very much care. And that, too, was pleasure.

AFTER THERON HAD LEFT, BASIL SLEPT AGAIN, AND when he woke, the last rays of the sun were catching the warm stone of the building opposite, crowning it with gold. It was getting cold in Basil's room, or rather, colder. The fire was out again.

Basil groaned and heaved himself out of bed, pulling the coverlet with him. Gathering his clothes was unexpectedly difficult. His gown was puddled just inside the door, his breeches were under the bed, along with a single stocking. The other was in the far corner, behind a pile of books. He could not find his shoes, and after discovering that his last candle had been knocked from the desk and broken into three all-but-useless stubs, he sat down on the bed and sighed.

"'The love of kings is as the sun,'" he quoted aloud, "'that now blesses the earth, now scourges it with scorching ray.' Placid, somewhere or other. Middle of the page." His foot brushed against a shoe hiding under a drift of papers, which must have fallen from the bed. Unearthing its fellow, Basil reflected that his indifferent housewifery was hardly Theron's fault, and that he should spend his evening in setting the place to rights. But first he must buy some candles and some wood, if he could only find his purse.

It took several hours, but at last Basil's bed was made, his books were neatly stacked, his papers were sorted and tied with tape, his clothes hung up on hooks. His mug and tin bowl were washed and drying on the

chimney-piece. He'd mended his pens and cleaned and filled his ink-pot. He'd sent the scruffy boy in search of candles and firewood and tipped him handsomely for hauling them up the stairs. He'd dusted his candlesticks and the engraving of Hilary he'd torn from a worm-eaten copy of Vespas and nailed to the wall. Sweeping the floor—a homely task he hated—he left for last.

When he came to the bed, he pulled out everything under it: stray papers, a copy of the history of the University he thought he'd lost, a pair of shoes, a black hat furred gray with dust. The document box. He dusted it in a housewifely fashion before opening it.

"There's no time for this," he said aloud. "Theron's coming."

Theron would be late. Basil had been avoiding the Book of the King's Wizard for too long, now. It was time.

He unfolded the linen from it as if he were undressing a lover. And he opened the cover like a man opening the door to a room where someone waited. The words were waiting for him to discover them, he knew, to unfold their secret meanings and make them live.

The letters lay dark and heavy on the page. Basil stared at the secret tongue. It teased him, dared him…He picked out the letters, and spoke two syllables aloud. He felt like a fool. It made no sense, and never would. They felt strange in his mouth, as if he were picking up pebbles or nuts and trying them on his tongue. He spoke them again, and despite himself, he slowly smiled. If he was right about the book, and he must be right, no one had uttered these same sounds for nearly two hundred years. He glanced up at the page heading: *To Lende a Man Create Potencie*. Blushing, he slammed the pages shut. But the tip of his finger remained between them. Carefully, he opened the book again. *To Inspyre Love in One Unwilling: an Illusion*, read another page. Basil snorted. Certainly an illusion; weren't they all, these so-called spells? Well, weren't they?

The University Clock struck midnight. Where was the boy? Basil cast an impatient look at the door. Theron had told Basil he loved him, a declaration that begged to be answered in kind. But could he? That he was fascinated by Theron he would readily admit, drawn to his strong and slender body and his spirit that was brighter and quicker than any man's he'd ever known. Was that love?

Or was love in fact the true name of that uncomfortable feeling which kept coming over him lately, the fierce, almost cruel thrill of possession that sometimes seized him with Theron in his arms? It was not unlike the sensation he got from touching the wizards' spell-book, which was equally mysterious, in its way, as his kingly lover, and as desirable, too. Perhaps, indeed, he loved them both. Perhaps he only needed to study love.

Basil shrouded the book again and restored it to its box, and just in time: a tapping at the door announced Theron, glittering with melting snow and carrying a large basket.

"I've brought us provisions: cold beef and bread and a dried-apple pie and some potatoes to roast. And a fresh shirt, my scholar's gown, and a suit of clothes in case we want to go out. And I've told Sophia not to expect to see me for two or three days." He looked about him. "This is very cozy."

Basil took the basket from his hand, set it on the floor, and gathered the boy into his arms.

"Your wizard awaits, my king," he murmured into Theron's wet hair.

chapter XII

THE SUN ROSE ON A CITY ALL HUNG WITH diamonds, carpeted with white, and damply cold. As the University Clock struck nine, the scruffy boy ran out of the door on Minchin Street and slithered through the snow, now rapidly turning to slush, to the lecture hall at LeClerc, where he informed the waiting students that Doctor St Cloud was indisposed. Since the magister had been looking odd for some time now, no one was surprised.

They were, however, worried. A magister with only student fees to live on cannot afford to be ill. As one, twenty black-robed agents of mercy started toward Minchin Street, so bent on bringing their magister succor that they might have appeared at Basil's door empty-handed had Benedict Vandeleur not stopped them.

"We'll need chicken soup and meat jelly, a bottle of dark porter and a loaf of good white bread—a blanket, too."

"We'd better wait on the porter and the meat jelly." Peter Godwin held out a meager handful of copper and brass. "This is all I can spare. We're poor students, Vandeleur. That's poor, as in without funds."

"You're a fine one to talk, Godwin," said Fremont. "You can go back up the Hill any time you want, eat until you're full and sleep in a room with a fire and enough blankets to keep half of us warm all winter. For you, poverty is an affectation; for us, it's reality."

"Shut up, Henry," said Vandeleur. "Godwin can't help being born noble. And his allowance has bought us all plenty of dinners, too. I'll take everything in your purse, though, Godwin, if you don't mind."

Peter Godwin laughed and emptied his purse, which encouraged two other sons of wealthy fathers to empty theirs. A discussion ensued about the best way to spend the bounty. Several students, cold and bored by the ordinary domesticity of their errand, decided to repair to the Nest for a warming drink. "Doctor St Cloud won't need us all," said one, apologetically. "Tell him to hurry back. Then come join us at the Nest. We'll keep Historians' Corner warm for you."

Vandeleur's initial enthusiasm had been cooling as fast as his toes. He weighed the purse in his hand, hesitated, and said, "Blake, you're a sensible man. Here"—he pressed the purse into his friend's hand—"send to the Nest if you need help."

"Aren't you coming?" said Lindley reproachfully. "Doctor St Cloud may be dangerously ill."

Justis tucked the purse away in the bosom of his shirt and wondered, not for the first time, how it came to be that men who could track the complexities of the Arkenveldt Treaty could be so utterly lacking in common sense.

"Think, Lindley," he said. "If the magister is dangerously ill, do you really think he'll want the whole boiling of us crowded into his room?"

Lindley would have argued, but Vandeleur said, "My very thought. If Doctor St Cloud is ill, Blake here is perfectly capable of seeing to him."

"While you're seeing to the new barmaid," sneered Fremont.

Vandeleur cuffed Fremont none too gently, and went off after Godwin and the rest, leaving Lindley, Fremont, and Blake in the cold, wet street.

Fremont glared at Blake. "This is what you wanted all along, isn't it? It's funny, it is, how you've managed to insinuate yourself into the inner circle after only three months. Why, I wouldn't take it on myself to order people around as you do, and I've been following Doctor St Cloud for two years."

"No one's stopping you from following him now," said Justis reasonably. "You can go ahead of us, if you want, and tell him we're on our way with food."

"And let you get all the glory?" asked Fremont. "Not likely."

An hour or so later, Blake and Fremont and Lindley were knocking at the street door of Basil's lodgings and telling the scruffy boy that they'd come to visit Doctor St Cloud. The boy surveyed them and their bundles with a suspicious eye, told them to wait, slammed the door, and disappeared. After a few frozen minutes of juggling increasingly damp and disintegrating parcels, Fremont rattled the latch, found it locked, swore sulfurously, and attacked the knocker.

"He'll come when he comes, Fremont," said Lindley, inspiring a scathing analysis of his opinions, his intelligence, and his character that served to while away the time until the door opened once more on the scruffy boy and his suspicious eye.

"Doctor St Cloud sends his thanks," he said, "but begs that you leave your food with me." He grinned, showing a large gap in his discolored teeth. "He's mortal indisposed to see company right now."

"We're not company," explained Lindley, elaborately patient. "We're students. If he's sick, we want to take care of him."

"So you just step aside, son," said Justis.

"He's mortal indisposed," said the boy rather desperately.

"It's all right," said Blake, kindly. "We'll tell him you delivered his message just as he told you. He won't be angry, I promise." And, gently but inexorably, he pushed past the boy and led the little procession up the carved stairs to their magister's door.

On the landing, Blake suffered a crisis of confidence and had to remind himself that when a sick sheep hides, it's a shepherd's duty to seek him out. He knocked briskly on the door. "Doctor St Cloud?"

"He's sick," snapped a male voice within. "Go away."

"It's Justis Blake, sir, and Lindley and Fremont. We've brought you a chicken."

A murmur of voices within, a sharp creak of ancient floorboards, and the door opened a crack.

"Chicken," said Theron Campion unsteadily. "How kind of you. It's precisely what he needs. He's very run-down, I'm afraid. I had a terrible time with him, up half the night." His lips trembled and puckered. "He's better this morning," he went on, "but very tired. This should set him up nicely. Thank you."

Justis stared at Theron's hand, outstretched for the basket, at the wrinkled scholar's gown he was holding closed around himself, at his dark hair tangled over his shoulders, at his heavy eyes and bare feet and legs. It seemed that Doctor St Cloud wasn't a sick sheep after all, just a randy ram.

"We were worried," said Justis flatly. A faint color rose to Theron's throat and stubbled cheeks.

"There's soup, too. And a bottle of porter," said Lindley, choking on the words.

"I gather he doesn't need the blanket?" Fremont inquired nastily. "Or a soothing syrup? Or a physician?"

Theron's fingers tightened on the gown and his chin came up. "I'm taking care of him," he said. "If he needs a physician, I'll send for one." He held out his free hand. "Thank you for the food. He'll be very grateful."

"Here." Lindley thrust his bundles at Theron, who received them reflexively, allowing his gown to swing open on his nakedness. Lindley turned and fled down the stairs.

"Not bad," said Fremont, leering appreciatively. "Will you nurse me next time I get sick?"

Theron and Justis said, "Shut up, Henry," in disgusted chorus. Theron's mouth trembled again, clearly on the edge of laughter, and Justis lost his temper.

"Tell Doctor St Cloud," he bellowed in the voice he'd used to call his mother's pigs, "that his students eagerly await his return to full health. Tell

him that we are worried about him."

Theron was biting his lips, struggling with rage and laughter and parcels. The door opened fully, revealing Basil St Cloud in shirt and breeches.

"Thank you, Fremont, Blake," he said. "I accept your good wishes and your offerings. Please inform your fellows that I will take up my lectures in two days' time—two days, Blake, neither more nor less." He took Theron's arm, pulled him back into the room, pushed the door half shut. "Go away, Justis," he said wearily. "Two days. I promise." Then the door closed, not entirely cutting off the sound of Theron's bright, helpless laughter.

THEY FOUND LINDLEY WAITING FOR THEM JUST INSIDE the street door. The skin around his eyes was taut; his lips were pressed into invisibility.

"It's not worth crying over," said Fremont. "You're clearly not to his taste."

"One of these days," said Justis, "someone is going to kill you, Henry."

Fremont bridled. "Come now. We live in enlightened times. Swordsmen are just for show, these days. Besides, what student could afford a death challenge on me?"

"Theron Campion could," said Lindley tightly.

"Thinking of calling one on him?" Fremont's voice was taunting. "I didn't know your father was a noble, Lindley. Unless there's something you've been keeping from us. Something other than lusting after Doctor St Cloud, I mean."

In the common run of things, Anthony Lindley was a gentle soul, but even the gentlest soul will turn violent when pricked in its most vulnerable part. With a howl of fury, Lindley leapt on Fremont, fists flailing. They tumbled out the door into the mud and trampled snow. Neither of them was any sort of fighter, but they made enough noise about it to attract an interested crowd of shopkeepers and idlers.

"What's it about?" the potboy of the Ink Pot inquired aloud.

A chorus of voices answered him: "A woman, of course.—A whore at Mother Betty's.—Ginger, probably: all the students are in love with her.—Idiot! It's a matter of honor.—It's money, I tell you.—Gambling.—Drink…"

“Students don’t need a reason to fight.” A large, ruddy man in a red shawl and white apron shook his head angrily. “They fall to as naturally as stags in autumn. Not a week ago now, I had a fight break out over god-knows-what, two long tables cracked before I knew it, a bench splintered into matchsticks, and half my tankards bent into scrap.” He tweaked the potboy’s ear. “Run find the Watch, boy, tell them there’s a riot brewing in Minchin Street.”

Justis, who’d been inclined to let his friends fight it out, seized Lindley, who was temporarily uppermost, by the slack of his robe.

“Watch, Tony!” he shouted. “They’re calling the Watch. Kill Henry later, if you like. I’ll help.”

Lindley scrambled to his feet, pulling Fremont up with him. Fremont, under the impression that the fight had reached some sort of climax, windmilled at him until Justis shook him from behind, shouting “Watch!” in his ear. By now, whistling could be heard at the bottom of the street, and cries of “Ho, there! Halt!”

The three young men took to their heels, bolting between two buildings into the web of alleys that netted the University together. Fremont slipped on some ice and fell heavily. Justis pulled him up, thrust his shoulder under his arm, and hauled him along. A mangy dog tied up behind a shed began to bark hysterically. Sounds of pursuit grew louder; the three swarmed over a wall into a snow-drifted garden.

As soon as he was safely on the ground, Fremont shook Lindley’s supporting hands away. “Don’t touch me,” he hissed. “You tried to kill me.”

Justis put a large and gritty hand over Fremont’s mouth, jerking his chin significantly toward the wall they’d just scaled, on the other side of which the dog yammered and the Watch cast about for the scent. They shouted to one another and to the heads that popped out back windows, banged on a few doors with their brass-headed truncheons, and finally went away again.

Justis surveyed the damage. Fremont’s gown was torn and filthy, and his bony cheek was beginning to swell and darken. Lindley’s lip was split, and he’d gotten dung in his red hair. They were all three muddy and soaked and cold as fresh-caught fish.

“They’ll never let you into the Nest looking like that,” said Justis. “We’d better find a pump you can stick your heads under.”

As it turned out, no one even noticed their arrival at the Nest, Vandeleur and Godwin had relieved their anxiety over Doctor St Cloud's perilous state by knocking back a pitcher of beer, and from there had quite naturally fallen into a violent argument about magic. Quotes from Hollis and Delgardie flashed like swords, drawing the amused attention of several onlookers.

"Are you calling the author of *The Fall of the Kings* a fool?" Godwin was demanding. "I don't care how ill he is, Doctor Tortua's read more books than you've had hangnails, Vandeleur, and if he says the kings and the wizards got together and made magic, then there's something in it."

"What's 'in it,' as you so elegantly put it, is not for children."

"Oh, shut up, you newts." It was a quiet voice, a muttered comment, but it happened to fall into a moment when both debaters were simply glaring at each other, so everyone heard it. The students turned as one to see the man who had spoken. It was the Northerner, Alaric Finn, sitting up on a nearby table with his feet on the bench.

"I beg your pardon?" Peter Godwin said.

"Ever the gentleman, eh?" Finn sneered. "Well, my little lord, how would you like me to settle this argument for you right now? I'm about up to here with your endless babbling about things you know nothing about."

"And you do, I suppose?" Vandeleur demanded truculently.

"In fact, yes. And not from books, either. We know, up in the North, we've always known; about the Sacred Grove and the Deer Hunt and the Royal Sacrifice."

"The Royal Sacrifice, or the King's Night Out," drawled Fremont into the silence. "It sounds like a bad play."

"Shut up, Henry." The chorus was general.

"Go on, Finn," said Justis Blake. He was just as glad they'd found something to distract them from the question of what might be ailing Doctor St Cloud. "You've been hinting about this since term began. Now it's time to tell us about it."

Finn eyed the group suspiciously. "You'll laugh. Or tell me it's treason."

"Not a bit of it," said Vandeleur expansively. "Speak all the treason you like. We won't say a word."

"Of course we'll say a word," said Justis. "But we won't run to tell the Council. And we won't laugh."

"I will," said Fremont. "I'll laugh all I like. Magic! I'm not surprised Lindley and Godwin here are panting to hear Finn's fairy tales—they're barely out of the nursery, after all—but I'd credited Vandeleur and Blake with more sense. I've got better things to do." And he limped away.

"Well," said Vandeleur. "That's him gone."

"Can't say I'm sorry," muttered Lindley.

"Peevy bastard," agreed Finn. "Now, are you going to hear me out or not?"

"Have at it, Finn," Vandeleur said graciously. "We're all ears."

Finn gaped. Blake's mother would have said he looked like he'd asked for a drink of milk and been given a cow. The boy looked to be seventeen or so, of old Northern stock, proud as a peacock and poor as a charcoal-burner in summer, sent South to the City to mend the family fortunes. Blake wondered what his parents thought he was studying. Law, probably, or Natural Science.

Finn collected himself and began. "The kings came down from the North, to mingle their seed with the Southern stock, and their sons became kings in their turn."

"My little sister knows that," one of the young nobles jeered.

"You know it," Finn countered. "But you haven't thought about it. It also means that their children and their brothers married with the Southern noble families. So you've royal Northern blood in your veins, all you Southron nobles—you, Godwin, and you, too, Hemmynge. There's not a one of you doesn't carry the old magic in his blood."

"You've no call to be insulting," said Hemmynge, aggrieved. "Damned if I don't ask you to step outside."

Vandeleur put his hand on the young noble's shoulder and kept it there. "What's your point, Finn?"

"My point," said Finn impatiently, "is that you're all part of the magic of the land whether you believe in it or not."

Everyone was getting restless and annoyed, a fatal combination. Finn had no more idea how to lay out an argument than a frog had how to fly. Blake, prey to the uncomfortable feeling that he was responsible for the

Northern boy's predicament, said, "Begin at the beginning, man. You need to persuade us first that the kings were magic."

Finn nodded, pulled himself together, and began. "It all starts with the Land." Justis could hear the capital letter in his voice: Land. The title of a personage, like Green God. "This is the Northern Land I'm talking about, not your soft South. It was a hungry land and dry and unfriendly to man."

"Cow dung, man." It was Hemmynge again. "That'll fix it, and clover plowed under in the fall. Or so m'father's steward says."

Finn's jaw bunched at the corners and his narrow eyes sank beneath his brows. "There were no cows," he said through his teeth. "And even the clover withered among the rocks. If you don't hold your tongue, Hemmynge, I swear I'll hold it for you."

"I'd like to see you try," sneered Hemmynge inaccurately.

This was too much. Blake exchanged a speaking look with Vandeleur, who shrugged helplessly. Vandeleur was only Middle City; Godwin was too young; everyone else would be perfectly happy if a fight broke out. It was up to him. He touched the young noble's sleeve and said, "Come on, Hemmynge. You're bored, and who would blame you; ancient history's not even your subject. Let the poor boy tell his old wives' tales in peace. I'll buy you ale."

Looking from the interested faces around him to Blake's wide, muscular hand on his gown sleeve, Hemmynge shrugged ungraciously, muttered, "Don't mind if I do," and slouched off unresisting. By the time Justis had delivered him and his tankard to a sympathetic group of nobles and returned to the historians, Finn had overcome his initial awkwardness and hit his stride. He spoke fluently, his nasal Northern accent oddly suited to the formal cadences of his story, his bitten hands underscoring, emphasizing, guiding, his narrow features animated, his deep-set eyes glittering. Blake shoved onto the end of a bench next to Lindley, who was listening with rapture.

"So the wizards chose their candidates from among all the Companions, called the Little Kings, each wizard a candidate, and taught them and loved them and filled their bodies with magic."

"I'll just bet," muttered someone, but everyone ignored him.

"And when the old king gave his body and blood to the Land, the candidates went into the grove, and suffered the Trial, which is a Mystery

and not to be spoken of. He who walked alive from the forest became king, and his wizard became master over the other wizards. In times of war, the young king led the army of Companions in battle and in times of peace he went on royal progress to spread his seed throughout the land. The crop was sons of the royal blood, little kings who would grow to provide new Companions and a fresh, young king when the time was right. And the kings' blood watered the land and the kings' flesh fed it, so that it grew fat and pleasant and friendly to man, and sent sheep down from the mountain passes and the wild horses from the high meadows to serve man and clothe him, and deer from the deep forest to give him meat in winter, when no thing grows that is green."

There was a little silence when he'd done. Looking at the faces of his friends, Justis thought they were more than half convinced by Finn's tale. He certainly was. To his farm-bred soul, the whole thing made an odd kind of sense. You feed the Land; it feeds you. And University had taught him that there are many kinds of feeding, many kinds of food.

Then Vandeleur smiled and said, "You've missed your calling, Finn. You ought to be a story-teller or a writer of romances."

Finn glared at him, beetle-browed and sullen once more. "I didn't make that up," he said. "It's all true."

"Where's your proof?" Vandeleur asked pleasantly. "Where are your documents and references? And what did these wizards actually *do*? Other than make hay with the kings, I mean?"

The spell was broken. Men elbowed each other, snickering. Above their laughter, Finn said, "Don't mock me, Vandeleur. It's in Hollis, too. The wizards chose the kings and bound them to the Land with a chain of gold."

Lindley exclaimed, "The window in the Great Hall! There's proof, Vandeleur. It's got a wizard and a grove and a deer in it. It even has the golden chain."

"Has it?" said a student behind Justis. "That's interesting."

"But it doesn't prove anything," objected Godwin, "except that whoever made the window knew the same old stories Finn's people tell."

"The window was brought down from the North," Lindley pointed out. "Alcuin brought it as a bride-gift to Queen Diane—it says so in the Official History of the University."

"You actually read that?" someone asked.

"Still," said Vandeleur. "Godwin's right. It proves nothing. I don't deny the window's antiquity or its symbolism—it illustrates Finn's fairy tales very neatly. I do, however, deny its literal truth. My grandmother has a lovely statue of the Green God in her garden, blessing the roses. That doesn't mean there's actually a god sitting in a heavenly garden combing his leafy hair with fingers made of twigs. It's just something an artist made up to illustrate the idea of growth and plenty."

Godwin laughed suddenly. "Don't let the priests hear you say that, Vandeleur, or your grandmother either."

Vandeleur turned to Finn. "You've persuaded me that the wizards effectively ruled the ancient North because they figured out how to make barren soil fertile. I'll even accept that you Northerners believed, back in the mists of time, that blood sacrifice and ritual sex gave good husbandry a helping hand. What I will never accept is that there was any more to it than that. In any case, by the time Alcuin came South, the wizards were nothing but advisors and diplomats who lost a lot of their power in the Union and were unhappy about it. And unless you can come up with something more solid than folk tales, Finn, you'll never make me change my mind."

"Or," Godwin added, "convince Doctor St Cloud that you're any kind of scholar. He'd never let you get away without at least checking…Oh!" His face fell. "The magister! How is he?"

Justis, momentarily at a loss, looked down at his hands. Beside him, Lindley went taut and silent.

"Oh, no," Vandeleur exclaimed, blanching. "He's not…You should have *said*! What shall we do?"

"He's fine," Lindley ground out between gritted teeth. "Or he will be, when he's got it out of his system."

Everyone looked at him curiously, and Justis hastily added, "A mild fever —you know the kind of thing—you just have to sweat it out. He expects to be back in two days' time."

"And the chicken?" someone wanted to know. "The wine?"

"I imagine he's enjoying them right now," said Justis rather desperately as he felt Lindley tense against his arm. "Lindley," he said, taking the goat by the horns, "I wouldn't be surprised if you were sickening for it, too." He

stood and put his hand on the redhead's shoulder. "Off we go, Tony. I'll see you in bed with a hot brick to your feet, or know the reason why."

But Lindley shook him off. "There's nothing wrong with *me*," he said pointedly. "I'm going to stay here and have a drink. And discuss history with those who know something about it. You may go tuck yourself in if you choose."

Justis shrugged. As he climbed the steps to the tavern door, he glanced over his shoulder to see Anthony Lindley and four or five others sitting on the bench where Alaric Finn was resting his feet, looking up at the Northerner and talking animatedly.

chapter XIII

DURING THEIR MAGISTER'S ABSENCE, THE HEART'S core of St Cloud's students continued to meet, though not at LeClerc. Max, who owned the Blackbird's Nest, sighed when he saw them appear for the second day in a row at ten o'clock in the morning, hungry for food and drink and talk, with not enough coin among them to pay for a cup of gruel. He was willing to extend credit—he'd have no custom if he did not, and he knew someone would pay up eventually. So he served St Cloud's ancient historians and refilled their tankards as often as they emptied them, even when one of them grew so drunk that he could hardly lift the drink to his mouth.

The drunk was Henry Fremont, drowning the loss of an innocence he loudly denied ever having possessed. Fremont prided himself on having

been a hardened cynic from birth. No one believed this except himself, and he was alone in being shocked at the depth of his fury at what he considered the magister's betrayal. He'd gone to tell Vandeleur the truth about St Cloud's absence that same night, seeking Benedict out in the room he shared with Justis Blake.

Vandeleur's response had been disappointing. "You're a bit behind the fair, Fremont; Blake's already spilled the beans. So the wondrous Doctor St Cloud is human after all. With Theron Campion, too. That boy does get around. I don't see it myself, but then I prefer the girls at Mother Betty's. There's a neat little blonde there, Henry, could console you for the end of the world. My treat. What do you say?"

Fremont had said no, and a lot of other things Vandeleur would only forgive a man in pain, and left in search of a more sympathetic ear. Which he did not find. With the exception of Lindley, who wasn't speaking to him, all Basil's students were inclined to look upon their magister's fall from perfection with an indulgent tolerance.

"And why shouldn't he spend two days in bed with his new lover?" Peter Godwin wanted to know. "It'll do him good, and give us time to work on some of those questions he's having us research. You wouldn't believe the mess the Godwin archives are in."

"That's not the point," Henry said. "We thought he was writing, and instead he was rutting! He's supposed to be teaching, not scratching his itch with Theron Campion. Theron Campion. I ask you. Why, the man isn't even a historian!"

"Jealous, Fremont?" inquired Alaric Finn, which inspired Henry to try and rip Finn's nose from his face. Luckily, he was too drunk to do anything but fall sideways off the bench, which hardly even created a disturbance.

A couple of Henry's fellows picked him up and dusted him off and propped him up next to the wall. Sullenly, he accepted a fresh tankard and brooded into it while the conversation swirled around him. And then he said, loudly and suddenly, "Tha's it. I quit. No more fucking dead kings. No more fucking ancient historians or metaphysicians or eth—ethicists. I'm taking up astronomy."

"Give it a rest," said Vandeleur. "We all know you're no more interested in the motions of the stars than you are in drinking well-water. If Doctor St

Cloud isn't pure enough for you, go pay your silver to Doctor Crabbe, or Wilson or Ferrule."

Henry surveyed him with a bloodshot eye. "Doctor Crabbe? I'd rather suck a billy goat. It's all politics and ambition with him. He doesn't give two straws for the truth. All he cares about is kissing the right asses so he can settle his own ass in the Horn Chair."

Blake looked up from the corner where he'd been reading. "That's not fair, Fremont," he said. "I can't stand Crabbe either, but he's a good scholar in his way."

"That," sneered Henry, "is like saying a man who steals his bread is as good a baker, in his way, as the man who rises at dawn to knead dough."

"At least he only steals from the best bakeries," Godwin piped up, and was rewarded by general laughter.

Henry, predictably, was not amused. This was his life they were talking about, his future, his integrity. "That's it, then," he said gloomily. "I'm left with astronomy. Or the priesthood. Or suicide."

Vandeleur sighed. "You're getting boring, Fremont. Leave the University, go be a clerk or haul freight at the docks. I'm sick of your self-righteous anguish." He glanced around the small group. "There's a fiddler at the Spotted Cow could make a dead frog leap again. And plenty of sewing-girls to dance with. What do you say?"

Fremont's response was predictably foul. Vandeleur batted him gently on the head, which caused him to make a small, complaining noise and fall forward on the table, where they left him, snorting into a pool of beer.

THE NEXT MORNING FOUND BASIL ST CLOUD BACK IN LeClerc as promised, probing the finer points of Alcuin's marriage negotiations with Queen Diane. He was gloved, capped, and muffled against the cold, heavy-eyed and hectically cheerful. Had Vandeleur and Godwin been able to resist spreading the news about just where he'd spent the last two days, his students might have thought him heroically risen from his sickbed to teach them. As it was, every man of them knew it was passion, not the ague, that roughened the young magister's voice and brightened his eyes. Other than a tendency to snicker when he used the words "come" or "bed," the

students managed to comport themselves fairly well. If Theron Campion had chosen to attend that day's lecture, there might have been an incident; but, wisely, he did not.

Anthony Lindley was there, sitting by Alaric Finn, with whom he'd struck up an improbable friendship. Justis Blake was there, his heavy face unreadable, stolidly taking notes. Peter Godwin and Benedict Vandeleur were there, and all the rest of the paying students, except for Henry Fremont.

IN A SMALL ROOM ABOVE A PAWNSHOP, HENRY FREMONT woke at last to the sound of bells telling him that he was very late for Doctor St Cloud's lecture. First panic filled him, and then the knowledge that his head was full of knives, his mouth of dry leaves, and his stomach of cockroaches. By the time he'd disposed of the latter in his chamberpot and sluiced out his mouth with the small beer his roommate had thoughtfully left him, he'd remembered that Doctor St Cloud was a hypocrite and a lecher who cared more for his pleasure than for his students. After he'd staggered down to the yard and pumped a bucket of frigid water to wash his face in, and eaten an end of dry bread, he'd pretty well pieced together the events of the previous evening and begun to wonder what he was going to do now.

He couldn't stay at University, that was clear. He'd been betrayed and humiliated, not only by St Cloud, but by the men he'd considered his friends. They'd been laughing at him—he could see that now—laughing at his pain. Even Blake. Even Lindley, who was sticking closer to that madman Finn than his Northern stink. Briefly, Henry considered throwing himself out the window or into the river, but that was just the hangover. He wasn't entirely worthless—he remembered someone telling him so last night, someone who had found him kneeling by a gutter, spewing up beer. He'd lent Henry a handkerchief to wipe his face and a shoulder to support him to the door of the pawnshop. A stranger—tears came to Henry's eyes—a stranger had cared for him when his so-called friends deserted him.

Henry leapt to his feet, hung onto a chair until his vision cleared, retrieved his jacket from the floor, and turned out its pockets. His purse was there, with two brass minnows in it and a stub of charcoal and a fine

cambric handkerchief, very foul, and a square of pasteboard engraved with the name *Edward Tielman* and an address on Fulsom Street.

SOME FEW HOURS LATER, A TALL, SKINNY FIGURE LIKE a fence-post in a gown could be seen trudging through the Middle City, stopping from time to time to ask directions of a shopkeeper. His hair was plaited into a long rat's tail secured with black thread, his face was pink around the purple glory of his bruised cheek, and his eyes were as clear as Bet's infallible hangover cure could make them. His linen was clean, his suit brushed, and his gown sponged and pressed by the soft-hearted laundress who lived across the landing. He had no very clear idea of where he was going or what was going to happen when he got there, but at least he no longer wished he were dead, and that was something.

The address on Fulsom Street was not a shop or a lodging, as Henry had expected, but a largish private house, with steps climbing up to the door and a polished brass knocker shaped like a dragon's head. His curiosity roused, Henry rattled it, and was answered almost immediately by a poker-faced individual who could only have been a manservant. Feeling rather out of his depth, Henry thrust the card at the manservant and said, "Don't say your master isn't at home. He's expecting me."

The manservant stood aside to let him enter a narrow vestibule papered in cherry and white stripes. "As it happens, sir," he said woodenly, "Master Tielman is *not* at home. But he has directed me to show you into the library, should you care to wait."

Henry, haughtily, did care to wait. He was led to a cozy room lined with open cases, offered brandy, which he declined, and left with Tielman's books. When Tielman came into the room some time later, he found Henry sitting cross-legged on the hearth with a pile of books beside him and a folio volume open on his lap.

"Is that Rafael on birds you have there or *The Lineage of the Noble Houses*?" Tielman inquired pleasantly.

Henry jerked violently upright and glared malevolently at his host. "Do you always creep into rooms without warning," he snarled, "or is it just poor

students you try to catch touching your precious books? You shouldn't have had me wait in the library if you didn't want me to read them."

Tielman held up his hands. "Not guilty, I swear it. They're here to be read. I'm glad you found something to your taste." He sat in a well-loved armchair and cocked his feet on the settle. "Stay there if you like, and finish what you were reading. I've asked Fedders to bring in chocolate and some bread and cheese. Unless you'd prefer beer?"

Nonplussed, Henry said he'd take the chocolate, and sat fidgeting on the hearth rug pretending to follow out the bloodlines of the House of Tremontaine until the manservant came in with a large tray, which he laid on a table at his master's elbow before withdrawing.

Edward Tielman picked up a large block of chocolate with silver tongs and began to grate. "Milk or cream?" he asked.

Henry shuddered. "Water," he said. "And sugar."

"Of course." Tielman whisked a steaming stream into one cup, ladled three spoons of sugar into it, and held it out to the lanky student.

"Look," said Henry, ignoring the cup. "You want something from me. You must. Nobody invites a stranger to his house, last seen pissed as a newt, and feeds him chocolate and bread and cheese without having a reason for it. You don't even know my name."

"It's Henry Fremont," said Tielman promptly. "And you're perfectly right, I do want something from you. Are you going to take this cup or not?"

Henry hesitated, closed *The Lineage of the Noble Houses*, and took the chocolate from Tielman's hand. Then he accepted a hunk of bread and cheese, and before he knew it, he was sprawling among the books he'd pulled from the shelves, his gown discarded in the heat of the fire, drinking chocolate and disputing the historical roots of the City Council. He'd all but forgotten that this was something other than a social afternoon when the library door opened and Fedders said, "Lord Nicholas Galing, sir."

Henry jerked upright so suddenly that he knocked over his cup, which was blessedly empty. By the time he'd righted it, Lord Nicholas had shaken his host's hand and was standing over Henry like a hound over a rat, waiting to see if he'd bite.

"This is Henry Fremont, Galing," said Tielman. "He's at the University, studying with Doctor Basil St Cloud of History. Master Fremont, my friend Lord Nicholas Galing."

Fremont glared up at the young lord. He had an overwhelming impression of richness: rich clothes, rich brown hair richly curling over his forehead and the nape of his neck, a generous mouth, richly colored. About St Cloud's age, Henry guessed, but the clothes and the calculating expression made him seem older. Typical bloody noble, popping in without warning, expecting to be toadied to. Except it wasn't without warning—Tielman must have set it up. "I'm supposed to jump to my feet, I suppose, and say I'm pleased to meet you and have you any boots I could lick? Well, I'm not, and I'm very comfortable where I am, and I don't like the taste of boots."

Galing turned to Tielman with his brows raised. Tielman laughed.

"He's bright, he's observant, he has an excellent memory, his politics are impeccable, and he has a strong, if somewhat unsubtle, sense of right and wrong. He is also unbelievably rude."

"That would explain the colorful cheek," said Galing as Fremont goggled at Tielman. "Couldn't you have found someone with a little more address?"

"He's better off without that," said Tielman. "We were having chocolate, Galing. Would you like some?" Galing nodded. "More chocolate, Master Fremont?"

Between rage and curiosity, Fremont could think of nothing to say but, "I don't like being played with." The words did not adequately express his feelings, but he gritted them out with all the venom at his disposal.

Lord Nicholas settled himself in a cushioned chair across the fire and said, "We're not playing, I promise you that. I need your help. You are in a position not only to refuse, but to tell everyone you know that I've asked, thereby effectively disarming me. I can't afford to play with you—you're in the position of strength here."

While Fremont was digesting this speech, Tielman made two cups of chocolate with scalded milk, spiked them with peppermint liquor, handed one to Galing, and settled down to see what would happen next.

"What if it's something I don't want to do?" Fremont said at last.

"Then I'll just have to ask for your word that you won't talk about it," Galing answered.

"You'd trust my word?" Fremont asked incredulously. "I'm a potter's son, you know."

"And I'm a steward's son," said Tielman, "for whatever that's worth. You were talking last night like a man whose sense of honor has been outraged, suggesting that you do in fact have a sense of honor. Which no one wishes to outrage further."

"In my experience," Galing added helpfully, "potters and stewards are far more truthful than nobles."

A log fell into coals, sending up a spume of sparks. Tielman took a fresh log from the basket, threw it on the fire, and moved it into place with the poker.

Feeling at a disadvantage, Fremont retrieved his gown, got to his feet, and shrugged the black folds around him. "Very well," he said. "I'll listen to your proposal, and if I don't like it, I'll promise, on my honor, not to talk about it. I don't want any more chocolate, though."

"Barley water's what you need after last night," said Tielman wisely. "I'll ring for it."

Fremont found a very hard chair some way from the fire and occupied it in silence until the barley water arrived. He drank it down and said, "Tell me."

Galing and Tielman exchanged a glance; Tielman raised his cup to Galing and smiled. "Your deal, Galing, I believe?"

"I've promised Master Fremont not to play with him, Edward," Galing said easily. "I wouldn't want my word to weigh less than his." He leaned his elbows on his knees, cupped his chocolate in both hands, and studied the dimpled surface. "I'll be as frank with you as I can," he said. "I need an agent in the University."

"An agent? You mean a spy?"

"I mean someone who can observe without being observed, who can ask questions without occasioning comment, who has a good mind and a good memory. Spy," he said thoughtfully, "is a nasty word, but I suppose it's accurate. Let's say I need a spy, then."

Henry thought this over. "Fuck you," he said deliberately.

Galing cast a cold eye over Henry's bony form. "I'd rather you didn't," he said. "Edward, are you *sure* he's the right one?"

"I'm sure," said Tielman firmly. "Listen, Fremont, it's like this. There's been trouble in the Northern provinces—nothing very big, nothing very particular: rumors of secret meetings, deer guts left on a noble's doorstep,

farmers making dire predictions, that sort of thing. Lord Nicholas wouldn't have thought it worthy of notice if a Northerner had not presented a petition at City Sessions, demanding that the kings be reinstated."

"Even that," said Galing, "would not be significant, had he not killed himself."

"So he couldn't tell what he knew," Henry murmured, interested in spite of himself.

"Very likely," said Galing. "He was wearing a pin carved like an oak leaf in his hat, like a badge. And he came from the North. We did learn that much."

This was history coming to life with a vengeance. "Did you torture him?" Henry asked.

Galing shot him a look of disgust. "No. We did not torture him. He was very proud of being a Northerner."

"Like Finn and his friends," Henry said, light dawning. "You want me to see whether the Northerners at University are connected with this trouble you're talking about, and whether they're planning any trouble down here of their own."

Tielman smiled. "I told you he was bright," he said to Galing.

"You did. And he is. But that's not the whole story. You're a student of ancient history?"

Henry frowned, defensive at once. "What of it?"

Galing closed his eyes briefly. "What do you study in ancient history?"

"You're playing with me again," Henry warned angrily, and then he saw where this was leading. "You think," he said slowly, "that the Northerners are plotting to restore the monarchy, and that such a plot might be likely to show up among the ancient historians, or"—he corrected himself—"that the plotters would find adherents there. But they'd be fools to attach themselves to Doctor St Cloud, you know. His lectures are the first place anyone would look."

"You don't say," Galing drawled. "Tell me more of this Doctor St Cloud. Do you have reason to suspect that he yearns for the kings to come again?"

Fremont wasn't willing, despite his spleen, to go that far, but he did admit that Doctor St Cloud was king-mad. "He said the nobles were fools to separate the kings and the wizards. As long as the wizards kept them in line, the kings were fine. Why, Anselm the Wise was one of the greatest

thinkers of his age. Of course, he signed those laws limiting the wizards' powers, but it's clear he was influenced by Tremontaine…" He caught Tielman's amused look, flushed and muttered, "Well, you see the kind of thing he tells us."

"I do, indeed," Galing said with suspect sympathy. "We must keep an eye on this Doctor St Cloud. And the Northerners. So. Will you do it?"

Henry hesitated.

"We'd pay you for your trouble, of course," Galing said.

Henry glared at him. "I thought you weren't going to outrage my honor. I don't want your money." Yet he knew he could use it, if Galing insisted, with the rent overdue and his only warm jacket full of holes. And it wasn't as if he'd be doing any harm, not if Doctor St Cloud was innocent. Innocent! Why, he was dallying with the King-Killer's own great-great-grand-something! No sedition there. Whatever Henry thought of St Cloud's morals, he was sure that the magister had no more notion of current politics than a baby—he certainly wasn't politicking for the Horn Chair with any degree of sense No, Henry decided, there was nothing for these men to find out about Basil St Cloud except dates and theories He might even prove the young doctor blameless of royalist plotting.

Henry Fremont took a deep breath "What, exactly, would I have to do?"

book II

MIDWINTER

chapter I

NOT LONG BEFORE MIDWINTER, BASIL ST CLOUD came home one dismal afternoon to a slip of paper under his door: a summons to dinner that evening at Doctor Leonard Rugg's. "*Eels at 6:30*," it read, "*with Cassius and Elton. Do honor us. L.R.*"

He stood in the open door facing his cluttered worktable and thought he would rather work. Then his somnolent ambition woke and counseled him to follow his self-interest for once and take his scolding for neglecting his students. Besides, pride whispered, it might be good for Campion to call in Minchin Street one night and find his lover engaged elsewhere.

So Basil sent the scruffy boy off to Rugg's with a politely worded acceptance, and set out for Rugg's lodgings determined to swallow whatever the acerbic metaphysician might serve up.

Leonard Rugg's chambers bore witness to the popularity of his lectures. He had a sitting room and a study as well as a bedroom and a chilly closet, where his manservant Barkis slept beside the casks of beer. Among his other duties, Barkis did basic cooking over the sitting room fire: toast and hot water for chocolate and punch. Anything else was sent up by the landlady or, on state occasions, by the cookshop on the corner. As the cookshop's specialty was jellied eels, jellied eels is what Rugg commonly served his guests when he was moved to entertain—jellied eels and a very decent Ruthven claret.

The stairwell smelled faintly of eels and more strongly of a smoking chimney. As St Cloud ascended the steps to Rugg's door, he was uncomfortably conscious of notes unanswered, appointments missed, and conversations avoided or curtailed to make time for Theron Campion's seductive tutorials in the pleasures of the flesh. Elton and Cassius—and Rugg, above all—were undoubtedly offended at his recent behavior, and Basil hardly knew how to appease them. He would not apologize for doing what he so badly wanted to do, for following a joy he had not imagined knowing.

It was therefore in no very comfortable mood that Basil knocked at Rugg's door. When Barkis let him in, he was not surprised to see the three friends already gathered around the fire like the Three Wise Men of Huffington, glasses of wine in their hands, an empty bottle at their feet, and a second open beside it.

The astronomer lifted his glass in greeting and Cassius said, "There's ten coppers I owe you, Elton. I never thought he'd come."

"I only bet on sure things," Elton said. "I'm glad to see you, Basil, and so is Cassius, for all his sour face."

"Of course I'm glad to see him," said Cassius. "I never said I wasn't."

Their host stood up, glass in hand. "Don't stand in the door, man—it's cold. Come in. Barkis, another glass here, and a new bottle. My learned friend looks dry."

It was as if they'd all dined together yesterday. St Cloud relaxed a little. Rugg filled his glass with clear, red Ruthven and regaled the company with a salty tale about the Harris Chair of Rhetoric and his newest lover.

"Illiterate, I heard," said Cassius when the laughter had died down. "A pickpocket from Riverside."

"Why do you immediately presume he's a pickpocket?" Elton objected. "I acknowledge that most pickpockets live in Riverside, but it's absurd to say that everyone in Riverside is a pickpocket. He might be a swindler or a gambler or a housebreaker or a petty thief or a swordsman—"

"Or a whore," Rugg finished. "Which seems by far the most likely. I think we should eat now. Barkis, the eels."

The conversation over the jellied eels was largely political. Elton was at daggers drawn with Sanderling of Astronomy over the subject of the movement of the spheres. Doctor Sanderling subscribed to the ancient belief that all heavenly bodies visible in the night sky revolved around the earth. Elton, who had studied mathematics along with astronomy, had come up with a theory that the earth, and possibly everything else as well, revolved around the sun. Cassius supported him on the basis of mathematics, Rugg on the basis of friendship. St Cloud privately thought the entire question uninteresting and unimportant, the relative antics of the sun and earth having no discernable effect on human history. But he was entirely in sympathy with Elton's methodology.

"That's the problem, isn't it?" he asked rhetorically, his fork poised over his plate. "The old guard just won't accept that there's anything new to be learned by looking at the heavens or reading old documents or experimenting with systems of numbers, as Cassius did in that monograph there was such a flap over last year. They think all the important facts are

already known, and all that's left for a scholar to do is refine methods of interpreting them. Which is absurd."

Cassius swallowed his mouthful. "Exactly. Scholarship, particularly scientific scholarship, should be based on making fresh discoveries, not on the incessant mastication of old ones."

"Especially when those discoveries are wrong," Elton agreed. "All the gyrations the College of Astronomy has been going through year after year to make their theories fit the observations, when it's all right in front of their noses. Why can't they just accept that it's not their instruments or observations that are at fault, but their stupid, outdated theories?"

"Because they'd have to accept that they were blind, narrow-minded ninnies," said Rugg. "You can't blame them for declining to admit that their lives have been thrown away on the study of stupidity."

"Yes, you can," St Cloud objected. "Why would any *real* scholar persist in pursuing falsehood when he could pursue truth? Take Crabbe, for example. He's wasting a good, analytical mind on yet another commentary on Delgardie when what he *should* be doing is combing the archives at Halliday House or Hartsholt's warren up North, looking for diaries and letters that would tell us what was *really* happening up there after the Fall."

"As you have," said Rugg dryly.

"As I have," agreed St Cloud. "Oh, I haven't done research in the noble houses, not yet. There's no real need: I've found plenty of original documents in the Archives. And let me tell you, until Anselm's grandson, Iron Tybald, the kings weren't as bad as Vespas drew them, nor the nobles as spotless. It all makes sense when you know exactly what the kings did in the North before the Union. When I finish my new book…"

"Well, that's it, isn't it?" Cassius interrupted him. "When you finish your new book, how do you propose to get it past the censor?"

"The kings were deposed two hundred years ago, Cassius. There's never been a serious claimant to the throne."

Rugg frowned. "Wasn't there a Herriott raised an army once?"

"Sixty farmers, stark naked and carrying sharpened sticks," Basil said, "don't constitute an army. Herriott himself was barking mad. And that was eighty years ago. It's time we taught the truth, not politically convenient fictions invented by an embattled and cautious Council in our great-grandfather's time. Nowadays, surely, they have nothing to fear."

Rugg held up his glass for Barkis to refill. "Actually, that's what we wanted to talk to you about, St Cloud."

"The truth?" St Cloud asked casually, although his blood had begun to race unpleasantly. "Or Herriott?"

"Politics," said Elton. "You know you were never any good at them."

St Cloud carefully laid down his fork and wiped his greasy mouth on the hem of his gown sleeve. "I'm the youngest doctor in the University, Elton. I can't see that my lack of interest in politics has done me any harm."

"It didn't," said Rugg, "as long as it was obvious that all you were interested in was ancient history. Not a flashy subject, ancient history. Half of it is fairy tales and the other half, by your own accounting, is lies. If there weren't a richly endowed chair in it, I doubt it would still be taught. You can learn all you need about the ancients in metaphysics and rhetoric, if you ask me."

"Then I don't see why I can't say what I like," said St Cloud. "Not that I agree with you, of course. I can't see how we can hope to call ourselves educated men without understanding where we come from, the bad and the morally ambiguous as well as the good. But if the Governors feel as you do, then I should be able to preach the return of the kings on street corners and risk raising nothing but derision."

Cassius sighed. "Well, that's just the point. As long as it was nothing but dramatic lectures filled with highly-colored incident, slender monographs on the ancient roots of obscure laws, and *The Origins of Peace*, you were a brilliant academic scholar. What you turned up was pleasantly titillating, like listening to your grandfather reminiscing about the deviltry he got up to when he was a boy. It didn't have anything to do with the real world."

Elton glanced at St Cloud's frozen countenance. "Cassius, you're an ass. He'll be too angry now to hear anything we say."

"No, Elton, I'm not," snapped St Cloud. "I am angry, but Doctor Cassius has said nothing more than I've suspected. As long as their contempt has encouraged the Governors to allow me to teach and publish as I wish, I am grateful for it. I am at a loss, however, to see why you are telling me this now."

The three men exchanged a look, and then Rugg said, "It's this Campion business, St Cloud. It won't do. Sullies your purity."

Between fury and astonishment, St Cloud could hardly speak. "Purity?" he sputtered. "How can you speak to me of purity, Whoremaster Rugg? The School of Mathematics will have to invent fresh numbers to tally your mistresses."

"Damned self-righteous prig," Rugg muttered, pouring himself more wine. "Don't know why I bother."

"You had it coming, Rugg," Elton said. "Listen, Basil. Theron Campion's mother is the widow of a duke, lectures in the College of Surgery, and has enough power and influence to endow a chair in Mathematics—for women, too. Oh, yes, it's a done deal; the Governors couldn't block it, though they tried. His cousin is a duchess. Campion himself is, or will be, a very powerful and rich man some day. They already call him the Prince of Riverside! Becoming this man's lover is a political act, Basil, whether you mean it to be or not, and it's not a wise one. It taints you with intrigue and patronage when your chief strength was a complete and obvious unworldliness."

Basil stood suddenly, sending his plate crashing to the floor. "Unworldliness? How dare you? My chief strength is, or ought to be, the originality of my research, the rigor of my arguments. It makes no difference whether I'm a nobleman's lover or a ravisher of lapdogs as long as I'm a better scholar than Roger Crabbe. Which I am."

There was a moment of silence while Basil glared at the three men and they stared uncomfortably back. Basil decided he might as well leave now, having heard and said every word he could imagine the subject warranted.

"Doctor Rugg," he said stiffly, "Doctor Elton, Doctor…"

"Oh, sit down, Basil," said Elton wearily. "Of course you're the better scholar. What your liaison with Campion means is that now you're going to have to prove it."

"My book won't be ready. I've found new material…"

"Bugger your book," said Rugg. "You don't need a book. You need drama, you need spectacle, you need—"

"A challenge," Elton finished for him.

Everyone looked expectantly at Basil. He sat down slowly to think about it.

Academic challenges, like swordsmen's challenges, had grown rare of late. The last one St Cloud could remember was when a Fellow of Law had debated a full-fledged Doctor before the University Governors for the right

to be made a Doctor without having published. He'd lost, of course. He was a brilliant speaker, but that was not enough. Words draw no blood, and the final judgment rested with the Governors, who rejected his claim. Rules, after all, were rules; and the other magisters, who had duly published theses in their seasons, had made no objection.

Basil said, "If it's all about politics, as you say, what's to keep the Governors from deciding against me out of hand, as they did with that poor Law Fellow?"

"Well, it's a risk," Elton acknowledged. "But once the debate is all out in the public where everyone can hear, if you've got proof that Crabbe is talking out of his hat, they'll have to give you the Horn Chair. You're popular; there'll be an outcry if they don't."

"But our subjects are so different," Basil objected. "His specialty is the same as Tortua's: the fall of the monarchy and the rule of the Council of Lords. Mine is hundreds of years earlier. What can we possibly debate about?"

Elton leaned forward eagerly. "Methodology, of course. Methodology is going to be the real subject of every debate at this University for the foreseeable future. If you can just catch him out on some small fact, something that you've come across looking for something else—you know the kind of thing."

St Cloud nodded slowly.

"Then," said Cassius, picking up Elton's thread, "you can launch into a disquisition on primary sources and pure data, and leave Doctor Crab-cake to hide his head in the sand."

Basil thought a moment. "What do I do?"

Rugg was delighted to explain the procedure to him, and did, at some length, while Barkis cleared away the debris of the meal and another bottle of claret met its fate. Soon St Cloud's head began to spin with wine and the formal rules of academic challenge. "Time was," he said meditatively, "that apprentice wizards cried challenge upon each other, the loser to end his life as a crow or a mule or some lesser beast."

There was a dense and irritated silence. "You might want to keep away from the wizards," said Cassius at last.

Rugg nodded. "In fact, I forbid you to mention them. No, just listen, Basil. I'm your senior and your friend, and I know what I'm saying. Start

talking about wizards, and your job becomes that much harder."

"Astronomically," Elton agreed.

"By a magnitude of ten," put in Cassius, not to be outdone.

Rugg ignored them. "No one will know how brilliant your argument is if they're laughing themselves sick over your premise. Promise me, Basil. Promise you'll keep away from the wizards and all their works."

Basil looked around at his friends' faces, crimsoned by wine and firelight and earnestness. "I can't promise about the wizards," he said at last. "But I'll stay away from magic, if I can. I don't want to shame you. And I do want to win."

Rugg sighed. "That'll have to do, I suppose. Now. Debates are traditionally in the spring, at Festival time. That means you'll have to challenge Crabbe as soon as MidWinter's over."

"Spring!" Cassius complained. "Where's the drama if you challenge him three months before you debate him? Everyone's going to be bored to numbness with the whole affair by then."

"It gives the other man time to prepare," Elton pointed out.

"Or leave town," said Cassius.

The meeting broke up very late, with all of the participants quite drunk and very fond of each other in a conspiratorial kind of way.

"Never liked Crabbe," Rugg confided loudly as the fire burned low. "Humorless bastard—stick up his arse, eh? Glad to do him one in the eye."

"Inn—innov—New thinkers got to stick together," Elton declared. "Scratch each other's backs. Would you scratch my back, Basil?"

"To the bone, Tom," Basil said earnestly. "Day or night. Just ask. You, too, Leonard, Lucas. You've saved my life. Do anything you like."

"Get rid of Campion," said Elton. When Basil stiffened angrily, he waved a languid hand. "Sorry. No harm in trying. It's out of love, you know."

ALONE, FOR ONCE, BASIL WATCHED THE MOON TRACK its way across the panes of the high, slanting window over his bed, doubling itself when it passed over an imperfection in the glass.

Keep away from wizards. If they only knew.

“Secrets fester,” he murmured to the moon. “Knowledge must be brought to light.” He rolled over, fumbled under his bed for the box that held the Book and, pulling it out, held it in his hands. If only he could bring its secrets to the light, he thought, he’d break his promise to Rugg in a heartbeat. But the meaning of its spells was locked as tight as the dead mouths of the wizards who had uttered them.

Basil lit a candle, held a page near it, then up to his slanted window. But neither flame nor cold moonlight could illuminate the sense of those words, as thick and impenetrable as a night without stars. He ran his fingers lightly over the thorny, undecipherable lines. Their very incomprehensibility spoke to him of powerful rites crafted by masters of wind and soil and human desire, who encoded their wisdom in a secret language to keep it safe. The magic was real. It had to be real. He could feel it in his fingers when he turned the soft skin pages, still miraculously supple after so many centuries. He could see it in the recalcitrance of the words, which never seemed so foreign as when he tried to transcribe them.

Basil shook his head. He’d had too much to drink, that’s what it was. Magic wasn’t real. Not now. But to these vanished wizards, trained in its spells, steeped in traditions and rites and knowledge passed down from master to master, oh, to them it had been real as sunlight. Of this he was sure. The book told him that, at least.

The book told him that, but what would it tell others? The intangibility of his proofs was one reason to pay attention to Rugg’s caution against revealing the wizards as the new focus of his studies, let alone its source. Another was the tangible and utterly embarrassing fact that reading the book inevitably sent Basil into erotic daydreams that were as violent as they were explicit. Thinking of the book was tantamount to thinking of Theron and what Basil would like to do to him. Basil did not dare show Theron the book. And tonight had made it clear that there was no point in telling Elton or Cassius or even Rugg about his discovery.

It was too soon to show his hand, he told himself. He didn’t know enough about it. He must study Arioso’s notebooks, collate the commentaries, see what he could find out about the wizards who had put their names to the spell-book’s notes and conjectures, research the crest on the document box, turn it all into history: documented, analyzed, safely in the past. When he’d done all that, he’d write a book about it, and that

book would be the most important historical analysis of the age. With it, he could win the Horn Chair, even without Rugg's precious debate. He'd dedicate it to Theron.

In the meantime, however, there was a great deal to do.

chapter II

THE YEAR DREW ON TO MIDWINTER, THE WHITE Days between the old year and the new. It was a time of holiday for every soul in the city except the tavern-keepers and the Watch. The Hill swarmed with tailors and seamstresses, with purveyors of fancy goods and wine, with carts from the country bearing sheep and geese and deer and pheasants to be served up at MidWinter feasts. At the University, the MidWinter Brand went from door to door, collecting from each student his (and occasionally, her) statutory stick of wood for the Last Night bonfire in the Great Court. The honorable magistrates of the City Council sat in conference with civic-minded nobles of the Council of Lords, planning public entertainments.

Traditionally, the Last Night of the old year, which began the festivities, was a night of bonfires and mayhem, presided over by a University student chosen by his fellows. He was called the Little King; his court were his Companions. Magistrates still sweated in their cozy beds over tales of the bad old days, when Last Night left behind it ravished maidens, abducted children, corpses in the street, shops stripped bare of their wares and their furniture, and a handful of formal challenges to the death. The City Council had finally abolished the Little King and tried to abolish the selling

of liquor or the lighting of open fires for the ten days of the festival. That was the year the City had learned the true meaning of the word mayhem.

Now there were civic bonfires in the major squares, tended by the long-suffering Watch, and fireworks at midnight over the river. The whole city spent the night drinking and dancing in the streets, and if a dog was blown up by a firecracker tied to its tail or a few windows were smashed, well, a few nights in the lockup were enough to clear the taint of it in time for the new year.

Justis Blake's first year at University, he'd gone home for MidWinter to his country village, where they saw the old year out with fire and song and the little children fell asleep by the bonfire on the village green. He'd been homesick enough to endure his friends' teasing and the trouble and expense of going home. This year, however, he had decided to stay.

On the morning of Last Day, Doctor St Cloud lectured to no more than half of his usual audience. Which was a pity, Justis thought, sucking warmth back into his stiffened fingers, but only to be expected right before the holiday.

"In the archives of the University," St Cloud was saying, "there is a curious manuscript, written by one of the minor wizards attending on King Laurent. This wizard, who did not feel it necessary to sign his name to his private musings, conveniently spent many pages mourning certain ancient rituals, which he describes as you or I, when we grow old, might someday describe our University exploits."

Everyone chuckled. Justis glanced to where Finn was sitting rapt, his bony face sharpened to a fine point of concentration. Beside him, Lindley scribbled furiously. They both wore roughly-carved wooden leaves pinned to their hat brims, and there was a lovelock plaited into Lindley's copper hair. They'd begun floating about in a cloud of roses and musk shortly after the day Lindley had discovered his adored master with Lord Theron Campion. Vandeleur's opinion was that he'd settled on the Northerner out of pique, but Justis remembered how Lindley had looked when Finn was holding forth on little kings, wizards, and deer. It had been the look of a thirsty man offered drink.

Blake returned his attention to the lecture. "Now, the wizard's account of MidWinter presents a neat problem of scholarship," said Doctor St Cloud. "The name 'MidWinter Festival' was bestowed on the White Days

by law shortly after the Fall. It took a great deal of rereading and cross-referencing to determine that the wizard's Royal Hunt took place during the same time. Luckily, 'White Days' is a term of great antiquity, so I looked for a passage where the two terms fall together. And I found it." St Cloud took a small tablet of notes from his pocket and ran his finger down it. "Ah, here it is. 'This year, the White Days were gray, nor could the King's Wizard break the clouds, so that the Royal Hunt perforce took place in utter darkness.'

"So," St Cloud said, "I reread the wizard's memoir with an eye to the Royal Hunt, and this is what I learned. During the White Days, the king went a-hunting deer, leaving a young man, chosen by the wizards, behind him on the throne. This Little King ruled during ten days of license, when apprentices ruled masters and servants ordered nobles to do their bidding."

"Ten days is impossible," Peter Godwin shouted from the back bench. "Why, there would have been chaos."

St Cloud looked up. "I may have misread the passage. Perhaps you'd like to see what you make of it, and report what you have discovered, let us say, First Day morning?"

Godwin was silent.

"Never mind, Peter," Vandeleur soothed. "The manuscript will still be there when you've recovered from your hangover."

Finn turned on his bench and glared. "*Some* of us," he said pointedly, "are interested in what Doctor St Cloud has to say, and would thank you to shut up."

There was a good deal of angry murmuring at this—the students were excited and ready for their holiday, and Finn was not well-liked. Someone bounced an apple core off his hat—one of Godwin's cronies, probably—and the lecture might have come to a noisy end had not St Cloud burst out laughing.

"I'm flattered, Finn. And encouraged." He surveyed the restless students. "The purpose of the Royal Hunt was not simply sport and venison for the royal table. The killing of the deer was a ceremony intended to bring back the sun and ensure an early spring. There's an old Northern poem about it, very exciting, full of hunts and betrayals. But here's the interesting bit." He consulted his notes. "'Without his due of blood,' the wizard writes, 'the Sun dozeth in his winter quarters, and the frozen soil holdeth the grain

locked in its stony clods.'" St Cloud looked at them and smiled. "In these degenerate days, the Sun must eke out his due of blood from broken heads and bloody noses. Try and make sure they aren't yours. Dismissed."

There was laughter, applause, shouts of "Good Festival, Doctor St Cloud," the clatter of boots on the steps from the gallery, the scraping of benches, and a blast of air tinged with the smell of roast chestnuts as the students tumbled out into the narrow street. Full of holiday cheer, Blake slapped Henry Fremont on the back and offered to stand him some roasted chestnuts.

"Don't do that, you great ox," snapped Fremont. "You'll break someone's rib one day, and, like as not, it'll be mine."

Justis laughed. "Undoubtedly. Do you want chestnuts or not?"

Fremont shifted the pouch hanging from his shoulder. It was new, Justis noticed, made of good leather, and worth the price of a good dinner with wine. "Nice," he said appreciatively. "MidWinter gift?"

Fremont glanced down at the pouch as though he'd never seen it before. "That's it," he said brightly. "My father had a good year, sent me a purse. I fell prey to temptation in Tilney Market. Don't worry, there's plenty left to pay my tick at the Nest, and for roasted chestnuts, too, and even a MidWinter apple. Want one?"

Justis nodded amiably and followed Fremont to the vendor's cart, where a tray of MidWinter apples shone a deep, sticky gold. As a liar, Fremont was about as convincing as a wolf got up in a fleece, as his mother would say. The thought made Justis suddenly, dizzyingly homesick. He bit into the apple. Sweet, warm caramel and tart, cold apple flooded his mouth with the taste of home. It was all he could do to thank Fremont for the treat and find his way to his cold, dark room, where he could sniffle in peace.

On the Hill, Katherine, Duchess Tremontaine, looked to see that all was in order for her Last Night party. The bonfire was laid ready to light. There was, as always, plenty of food. She wore a splendid new dress and a cheap pearl necklace her mother had given her: one old, one new, as was the custom. Katherine did not love tradition for its own sake, but there were things that had always meant a great deal to her, and Last Night was

one of them. She liked to have her chosen family around her; they were her link to her future and her past. Her mother was long gone, and so was the alarming uncle, her mother's younger brother, who had left her the duchy. She liked to remember them both on Last Night.

So in a small room in Tremontaine House, tonight three candles burned. One was in front of a miniature, a portrait of a woman with soft brown hair and worried eyes. Katherine stood before it, fingering the pearl at her neck. Another candle illumined a bundle of papers tied with tape. She did not need to open them, she'd read them so many times. Marcus had helped her to collect them after the old duke had fled: letters he'd left behind, a curious mix of the deeply personal—invitations, love notes, hastily scribbled theories about the world—and daily trivia: guest lists and menus and bills. In the early days of her duchy, she had consulted them as if they held the secret of just what she was supposed to be doing there. There were also the few letters the vanished duke had sent home from Kyros, again a disparate lot: a request for money, a description of the house he was building, a request to see the little daughter he'd left behind. The duke had disliked sitting for portraits; those that existed, Sophia had in Riverside House.

The third candle burned on a table in front of a mirror: an invitation, of sorts, to the spirits of this night, of this House, to attend the festivities, to cast their gaze on the current duchess and see what they made of her tenure in their place. When she was a girl, Katherine had tried the little spells that country girls know in front of mirrors on Last Night, hoping to glimpse her True Love's face looking over her shoulder, or boldly calling up ghosts.

Fleet light, last night
Old year out
Show what is past
As I turn me about

But the Duchess Tremontaine did not turn her in a circle to see vanished sights. She looked directly into the mirror, and saw them all in her own face: the centuries of noble ancestors, bound to this city and to the land that sustained them…and, like a caddis-fly, her own brief life so far: the

people she had loved and learned from, feared and desired, who had all in some way left their mark on her.

She turned from the mirror, leaving the candles to burn, and looked out the window. In the drive below, horses were kicking up gravel, pulling up to the door with the first of many carriages. She heard children shouting, and the voice of her oldest friend, Marcus, who had chosen the name "Ffoliot" for himself because he liked the pattern the letters made. Marcus was laughing, and Katherine laughed too and went downstairs to join them.

LAST NIGHT FELL AS CLEAR AND BRITTLE AS THE ICE that skimmed the river. It was the kind of night where a shout is visible and hot air dances over open flames. Sundown was marked by a tocsin on the Cathedral bell, echoed by the bells of the University, Sessions Hall, and the Council Chamber as the Brands' Procession set out from the Cathedral. First came the High Priest, the Mayor, and the Crescent Chancellor in an open carriage, and behind them the other chancellors of the Inner Council—Raven, Dragon, and Serpent—accompanied by as many members of the Council as cared to come out, mounted on horses caparisoned with golden bells. Then came the City Magistrates, their horses decked in holly wreaths, and a company of priests on foot, carrying banners embroidered with suns and deer and boar and sheaves of wheat and other signs of plenty. The end of the procession was brought up by the three Mid Winter Brands —a noble, a student, and an apprentice, holly in their hats, carrying the flambeaux with which they'd light their respective bonfires.

The nobles' bonfire in the cobbled yard in front of the Council Hall was attended mostly by secretaries, minor officials of common blood, and the luckless lord told off to be that year's Brand, who was forced to be late for the glittering Last Night parties on the Hill, with their smaller, private bonfires.

Justis Blake, standing among his friends at the mouth of the Great Court, heard all this and more from Vandeleur, who had attended city Last Nights in his mother's arms and ever since.

"The Crescent chooses all three Brands from the civil rolls," he informed Justis as they stamped their feet and waited for the procession to

come round. “With a silver pin, they say, blindfolded, completely by chance.”

“If you believe that, you’ll believe anything,” said Fremont. “All the artisans and merchants want one of their apprentices to be MidWinter Brand. It’s supposed to bring good luck; it certainly brings customers. And none of the nobles want the job—it means they have to spend the night being polite to nobodies. It stands to reason there must be a brisk trade in bribes and favors.”

“Can’t you give it a rest, Henry?” Justis asked wearily. “It’s Last Night. We’re supposed to be bidding the old year and its worries farewell.”

Fremont’s answer was drowned in a shout from the end of the street. The blackness was punctuated by bobbing torches and everyone began to cheer. From the center of the Court, a group struck up the chorus of a traditional Last Night song, old as the hills and at least as dirty, and soon the air shivered with it. Justis found himself bawling along with the rest, tuneless as a cat in heat and ignorant of everything save the chorus, which he sang twice as loud because he knew the words.

It’s one *for luck and* two *for love*
And three *for beer and brandy.*
Four *times a night*
I can do it all right
And the sun comes up in the morning!

The leading carriage passed, glittering in the torchlight as if each gilded curlicue were a tiny, separate flame. The three men it bore, massive in furs and velvet, tossed posies of scented herbs into the crowd. One of the posies struck Blake’s forehead, but he wasn’t quick enough to catch it. He caught the flask Vandeleur tossed him, though, and took a swig of what it contained.

“That’s *three*,” Fremont said. “Maybe later, we’ll get lucky and have a taste of *two* and *four*.”

EVERYONE AT THE DUCHESS TREMONTAINE'S LAST Night family party was eating except its newest member, who was spitting up.

"Ooh," said his mother, "that was a *good* burp!"

"Diana," her brother Andrew objected, "do you absolutely *have* to do that in here? It's disgusting!"

Her twin sister Isabel, pregnant as a whale, waddled over to take the baby from her. "Oh, Andy, you were ten times as disgusting, wasn't he, Mother?" The baby settled into her arms. "There, my little cuddle-bunny, yes."

"Andrew was not disgusting," said his mother loyally. "He was a lovely baby. You all were."

"Except for Alice." Andrew poked his youngest sister with a sugar stick. "I remember, she threw up all the time."

But in the last year, Alice had stopped crying when he teased her. She snatched up a stick of her own, shouting, "Guard yourself, evildoer!"

"Oh, well done," applauded the duchess, who was giving the child sword lessons. "Nice form, Alice."

Alice's brother drew back with all the dignity of his thirteen years. "Alice is such a child," he remarked to his sister Beatrice, who was sixteen.

"So are you." She turned her back on him to fuss over the baby.

Their father waved a mug of steaming ale expansively. "You are *all* children," he said. "Lovely children."

Alice drew herself up. "I am not a child. I am a swordsman. Will I get a sword for New Year's, Papa?"

Marcus Ffoliot crouched down to look his youngest daughter in the eye. "Well, that depends, doesn't it? This is Last Night, and it's ten whole days 'til the New Year begins. Those ten days are very important."

"Why?"

Marcus had not had a traditional childhood. He looked over at his wife for help. Susan smiled and said in a storyteller's singsong, "Because the old year is dead, but the new one's not begun. The doors are open between old and new, and anything can happen."

Her oldest daughter, Diana, full of the authority of new motherhood, said practically, "You have to be good for ten whole days, then you get First Night presents. Last Night isn't for new things, it's for getting rid of the old. Did you give alms today?"

"Yes," answered Alice. "We went with Nurse to give away our boxes of old clothes and things. I gave away my red ruffled blouse," she added virtuously, spoiling the effect with, "Swordsmen don't wear ruffles."

"Papa!" Andrew whined. "You're not *really* going to give her a *sword*?"

"Oh, no," said Marcus mildly, catching Katherine's eye. "I'll let the duchess do that."

"But only if she practices hard these ten days," Katherine added.

Andrew rolled his eyes. "If *you* get a real sword, *I'm* leaving home."

His sister Isabel hugged him. "That's all right, you can come live with Carlos and me."

He pulled away from her. "And another baby? No, thank you!"

Beatrice said, "Don't worry, Andy, she's not getting a real sword. They're mad, but they're not that mad."

Alice swung her candy stick in an arc. "Maybe Jessica will get me one. She sends *excellent* presents."

It was Katherine's turn to roll her eyes. "Indeed. And she never asks if you've been good or not."

"I hope," said Susan mildly, "she doesn't send any more of those rather *curious* carvings."

"I hope," Beatrice breathed a prayer, "she sends *silk*."

"I hope she sends swords," Alice muttered.

Diana's husband, Martin Amory, was a banker. With the birth of his son, he was feeling expansive. "Come on, Alice," he said. "What do you want besides a sword? How about a new necklace?"

His wife put her arm through his. "No, dear," said Diana. "That's what *I* want."

Her twin looked at them enviously for a moment. Her husband, Carlos the musician, was out playing for a larger party elsewhere on the Hill. Katherine would pay for him to be with them at Tremontaine House, of course, but they'd agreed that that was no way to make his reputation. Still, it would be nice if he could be with her for the bonfire. Isabel helped herself to another piece of marzipan and looked up to find her twin at her side.

"Another year," Diana said companionably.

Isabel nodded and put her hand to her huge belly. "I'll feel better when this little one's decided to come and join the rest of us."

"Yes," said her sister, "you will. Do you want me to rub your back? Sit down and put your feet up."

Isabel eased into a chair. "I feel like I might pop at any moment."

"Ooh!" Diana shivered deliciously. "A baby born at MidWinter! How spooky. It's said they can see ghosts."

"Theron always said he could."

"Where is he, anyway?" Diana asked acerbically. "Off lighting a few fires on his own?"

Isabel laughed. "That was last year. Sophia's not here either. She's probably been deluged at the infirmary, and he's escorting her."

Predictably, her words seemed to blow open the door, ushering in the Lady Sophia and her son. Like everyone else at the party, Theron was dressed in festival splendor. His shirt was green silk, his waistcoat a fantasy of winter ivy and gold thread, his coat a richly patterned brocade of copper brown with gold piping. An emerald drop hung from one ear. He circled the room, kissing his relations by blood and by adoption. He admired the baby extravagantly and congratulated Martin. Diana waved from the corner: "Hoo-oo! Theron! I'm the one who did all the work!"

Grinning, he came over. "Just because you couldn't get anyone else to do it for you." She kissed him anyway, because it was Last Night.

"Isabel!" He sprang back from her pregnant sister. "Do you think it might be twins?"

"I know," she sighed from the chair; "I look like a pumpkin."

"At least," he said, "I can finally tell you apart."

"Bah," said Diana, "you always could. We had to work extra hard to fool you."

"Why, thank you." He bowed. "That's the nicest thing you've said to me all year."

"Well," she smiled poisonously, "you've got ten more days to deserve something better."

THE MIDWINTER PROCESSION CROSSED THE GREAT Court, past the heap of logs and sticks the University Brand and his cohorts had been building for a week, and out the far side on its way to the Sessions Hall. The magistrates

waved cheerfully at the singing students, many of them joining in for a chorus or two. The priests, singing their own MidWinter hymn, moved through the jollity like pebbles through a cow. They paced slowly and deliberately in the magistrates' wake, their ungloved hands patchy with cold.

"Are they deaf?" Justis bellowed into Vandeleur's ear.

"You could say that," Vandeleur bellowed back. "I think they're just so full of shit their ears are plugged."

A passing priest scotched this theory by shooting a furious look in their direction, bending Vandeleur and Justis almost double with helpless laughter.

"Look, look, you asses," screeched Fremont; "they're lighting the fire. Look, or you'll miss it."

"ALL RIGHT!" THE DUCHESS KATHERINE CLAPPED HER hands, and the whole room looked up. "It's almost time for the bonfire. If you don't have your lists all written, there's pen and ink laid out on the table."

It was the same every year. She always left plenty of time for them to collect their thoughts, time to savor the heavy paper, the different colored inks (some of them scented), the old-style quills cut from the feathers of geese and swans and even peacocks. Beatrice snatched up one of the latter, and a bottle of violet ink. Andrew found a crow's quill, and the gold.

Theron had already spent time alone in his rooms, composing his thoughts and his words carefully. Some years he wrote them as a poem, but this year he had drawn up a simple list—of his regrets, his mistakes, the things he wished the old year's flames to burn away. Ysaud was chief among them; he'd even made a little packet to throw on the fire: a ribbon she'd given him and a lock of her hair, all wrapped up in a poem he'd written her once. He'd noticed that Katherine had taken down the painting by Ysaud that had hung in the front hall. It was kind of her. He felt for the packet in his pocket, then went to tell Alice how to spell "aggressive."

WHEN THE UNIVERSITY BRAND LAID HIS TORCH TO the piled wood, a great shout went up from a thousand throats, and then there was silence while they waited for the fire to catch. Far from the center of the Court, Justis strained to see the pale, smoky harbingers of the fire that would burn away the griefs and cares of the old year and rouse the Sun from his long drowsing. It felt no different from the same moment in his village—the sound of breathing in the dark, the anxious murmurs soon hushed, the sense of time suspended, waiting on a tiny tongue of flame to release it.

First came the crackling of new-caught kindling, and then a joyous shout sounded: "Death to the Old!"

Justis plumed out a breath he hadn't been aware of holding and added his voice to the general roar: "Death to the Old!" Briefly, he thought of Doctor St Cloud, watching with the other doctors from the steps of the Great Hall, and wondered whether the traditional phrase disturbed him. Then he wasn't really thinking any more, but fighting his way to the fire with the twist of paper upon which he'd written his year's regrets and bitternesses.

THE TREMONTAINE BONFIRE WAS SOMETHING TO behold. The wood was all seasoned, with great logs sent up from the country expressly for the purpose. It was piled high behind the house in the garden overlooking the river (the duchess's gardener having assured her that the peonies loved the ashes).

It was tradition at Tremontaine House for the youngest child to bear the brand to light the fire. When they were growing up, that meant it had always been Theron—a fact bitterly resented by the twins, who had come into the world a scant six months before him. But Theron in his turn had been supplanted by Beatrice, and Beatrice by Andrew, and Andrew now by Alice, a fact Andrew pretended mightily not to care about.

Alice marched importantly to the fire, her blazing brand held high. Theron had always hurled his into the center; but Alice was a careful child. Delicately she touched the flame to the bits of dry straw that stuck out at the bottom, watching them catch before moving on. Only when she had circled the entire fire did she step back and throw her torch as far into it as

she could. Her mother let out a sigh of relief that only Marcus heard. He squeezed his wife's waist and kissed her, a small outlet for the joy he felt rising in him sharp and strong as grief, his love and gratitude for the family he'd never imagined he would have. Now that Alice was growing up, he wondered if Susan might manage just one or two more babies. Why should Is and Di have all the fun?

The whole staff of Tremontaine House was gathered there, too; people were singing MidWinter carols and throwing their past year's griefs into the flames. Katherine was embracing everyone and wishing them a healthy new year. New people began to arrive—friends and relatives paying calls, bearing fresh twigs and herbs to throw on each fire they visited. The Talbert cousins were among the first; as Katherine's nearest kin, her brother's children, it was only civil. Theron saw Charlie Talbert approaching and braced himself for another spate of horse-talk. But Charlie only saluted him on both cheeks, wished him a good year, and went off to flirt with Beatrice Ffoliot, whom Theron hoped knew better than to take Charlie seriously. Theron found Sophia indoors, settling Isabel in a chair. The girl looked tired and unhappy.

Theron bowed. "She blossoms like the MidWinter rose."

"You're an idiot," Isabel groaned. "Carlos was right, I should have stayed home. Theron, are you going to Lord Godwin's?"

"I suppose. We were invited."

"Well, honor them with your presence long enough to find my husband, will you? The beautiful bastard behind the keyboards? And tell him I'm staying here tonight."

Sophia squeezed her hand. "That will be best. I will send Molly in, to put you to bed."

Sophia looked magnificent in a gown of black velvet with white lace and a collar of pearls. It was one of the few times in the year that she bothered to dress according to her rank, and Theron always took considerable pride in escorting her to the Last Night parties, as if she were some foreign princess, stately and proud, exotic in her rich simplicity, her dark hair piled high. Once, when he teased her about vanity, she replied very seriously, "Your father always told me I must look my best before them all." *Them*—the nobles of the city—the people he belonged to, and yet did not. As for

his own dress, Theron did not follow fashion: he paid his valet to do that. But he did love beauty, and the sleek fit of a good coat.

GODWIN HOUSE WAS BRIGHTLY LIT, THE FRONT HALL crowded with people coming and going. The past three generations of Godwins had each produced a Crescent Chancellor; the family was important, and everyone came to pay their respects.

Theron followed Sophia into the ballroom. A fire roared at one end of it, for people to cast their twigs into. The room was very warm, but one old man, splendidly dressed, sat close to the fire. He was wrapped in quilted silk, and the skin on his ringed hands was as thin and fine as a moth's wings. With a rustle of satin and velvet, Sophia Campion knelt at his side and put one of her hands on his. He turned to look at her, and Theron marveled at the beauty that still clung to him. Here was an ancient king for Basil to admire! Michael, Lord Godwin, went back to Theron's father's time. Legend even had it that he himself had once fought the swordsman St Vier.

"Lady Sophia." Lord Godwin smiled. His voice was papery too. "I know that you, at least, are not going to start shouting 'Death to the Old!'"

"No, indeed. Theron and I are come to wish you good health."

Lord Godwin looked up. "So this is Tremontaine's boy."

"Yes, my lord," answered Theron, staring. His father would be nearly this old, if he had lived.

Lord Godwin took in Theron's long hair. "A University scholar. Getting old for that, though—you'll have to marry him off soon, my lady."

"Yes," said Sophia gallantly, "but your daughters are all spoken for, sir."

The old man chuckled. "I've a great-granddaughter or two floating about somewhere—but I don't know what their mothers would say about it. Have to ask them; I'm no longer in the business. Lovely to see you, my dear; come and call on me again, sometime."

Theron helped his mother to her feet. She tucked her arm into his, and as they walked away, he bent his head down to hear her say: "Your father told me Lord Godwin was lovers to your great-grandmother. But I am not sure I think so."

"Someone should write a history," said Theron dreamily, "a secret history —someone should ask him, or it will all be lost."

His mother dealt him a sharp look. "Some things are meant to be lost. History is for knowing wisdom, not gossip."

He thought of Basil again, and forbore to answer her. Instead he left her talking with an old acquaintance, and went off to the musicians to deliver Isabel's message to her husband.

After reassuring the startled keyboardist that his wife was neither giving birth nor dying, Theron went looking for food. He found a table with roasted meats, and was helping himself to venison when someone touched his arm. It was his cousin Gregory Talbert, Katherine's older brother, Charlie's father. Gregory was a florid man who now headed the house of Talbert. Theron did not like him, and he suspected his father hadn't either, or he would not have passed Gregory over in favor of Katherine for the duchy. Lord Talbert was not stupid, but he was annoying. He greeted Theron warmly, adding, "It is so nice to see you out and about!"

"I've not been ill," Theron said, surprised.

"No, indeed. But at this time last year, shall we say you were a bit hard to find?" Theron flushed. He'd spent as little of the festival as possible on the Hill, rushing back to be with Ysaud. Talbert knew it, too: "I hear you were having your portrait done," he said.

Theron refused to hide behind the duchess's skirts, but he was not above playing her in a family hand. "Yes," he said blandly, "Katherine wanted it painted." Invoking her usually shut the Talberts up. But not this time.

"I hear," said his cousin, "that it didn't work out. Now don't get starchy with me, my boy—I'm just trying to be a little helpful. It's nothing that isn't common knowledge, after all."

"Is it?" said Theron starchily. "I didn't know you listened to gossip."

"Oh, I don't, my boy, I don't! But people will talk. Plenty of us have sat for portraits to her, but few have been invited to stay…"

Theron could feel his temper rising. "Excuse me," he said, but his cousin laid his hand on his arm with surprising strength. "No, my boy, you listen to me. You may not like it, but what you do is noticed, and what's noticed is discussed. That is the world, and there's an end to it." Miserably fascinated, Theron allowed himself to be drawn off to the side. "It's one thing to enjoy

tavern girls or your school friends or whatever you like, in moderation. But to disappear into the clutches of a notorious woman—and then, when she's finally finished with you, to mope about in Riverside without showing your face on the Hill in Society…It's not good. My sister has never understood about Society, but then, the Duchess Tremontaine doesn't have to. And that Ffoliot fellow"—Theron's jaw clenched—"I beg your pardon, but he's not one of us."

"He might have married your sister," said Theron meanly, goaded beyond endurance, "and then where would you be?"

"Where would *you* be, you mean, if she had produced an heir? No, dear boy, don't try to outface me. I am older than you, and I know the world. You do not come to see me, and I have not forced myself on you. But this is something you need to hear."

"What is? That people talk about me? Believe me, I know that. Why else do you think I stayed in Riverside after the—after Ysaud? To avoid having to walk through a room full of types like you, all gossiping about my private affairs."

"And I tell you," the older man hissed in his face, "if you want to keep them private, then act as if they're private. Live whatever life you want behind closed doors, but live one also in plain sight for people to see, one that's *normal*."

Theron stepped back, his mouth open. "Normal?"

Lord Talbert took his interest at face value. "It wouldn't hurt you to spend more time with other young men of your own kind. You're not a boy anymore. Now, I know Charlie and his friends are always glad to see you…"

Theron didn't know whether to black his cousin's lights or laugh in his face, but he knew both would get him in trouble. "Yes," he said unsteadily. "Yes, I'll have to try and do that."

"Good man." With another squeeze of the arm, Lord Talbert turned away, and then turned back. "Oh, and the hair." One last squeeze. "Think about cutting it."

Theron thought about Basil making a curtain of it for them to kiss in. "Thank you, cousin," he said through gritted teeth. "Happy New Year."

In search of a drink, Theron nearly ran into one of the Godwin boys—Peter, it was, with his scholar's hair pulled back in a curly little tail, and

with him, the geography student Lord Sebastian Hemmynge, eyes bright with drink.

"Campion!" The other noble students greeted him like a long-lost brother, and he returned their embraces. "We are dying of a surfeit of aunts and grandmothers," Hemmynge declared, "and people who don't know Placid from a broken pocket watch. The University bonfire's on in the Great Court, and there will be whiskey and music and girls—and, of course, lots of fine rhetoric. Will you join us?"

"Nothing," said Theron heartily, "that I would like better."

And fifteen minutes of warm farewells found them out the door and heading down the hill with their bright torches, singing at the top of their lungs on the way to the University.

JUSTIS DIDN'T KNOW HOW MUCH TIME HAD PASSED SINCE the bonfire had been lit. Benedict Vandeleur's flask of spirits was nearly empty. Alaric Finn was pulling from a skin of new beer; Anthony Lindley, who had no head for drink, had been sick. He still looked a little white around the nose, but he'd recovered enough to dance at the edge of the space cleared by the bonfire's heat. He had braided dozens of bright ribbons into his red hair and tied them off with brass bells that glittered as he whirled like flying sparks.

Justis reached behind his head to pull off the cord confining his own sandy hair and shook it free. It felt wonderful.

"Pretty," a strange student said, and pulled Justis's head down to his for a kiss. Justis let himself be lost for a moment in the warmth of the stranger's lips, the tang of ale on his tongue, and then he disengaged himself, laughing.

"You're pretty, too," he assured his admirer. "But I prefer hens to cocks. Don't be offended."

The student shrugged. "Don't know what you're missing," he said cheerfully, and staggered off in search of a more congenial partner. His hair slithered across his back in a mass of tiny braids.

A hand gripped Justis's arm and tugged him around to face a fellow historian—not someone Justis knew well. Cortney, he thought his name

was. “Here. Have one of these.” He thrust a hard and lumpy object into Justis’s hand. It was a wooden leaf on a string.

“Where’d you get this, Cortney?” Justis asked.

“Get it?” Cortney blinked slowly. “I didn’t get it. It came to me. I looked down, and there it was. They were.” He indicated his own chest, which was decorated with a similar leaf. “I gave you the extra one.”

“Why?”

“I like you, Justis. Don’t know why.” Cortney frowned. “Hang on. I do, too. You’re a decent man, Justis Blake. Not as bright as some, but decent. I want to shake your hand.”

He held out a plump, chapped palm, which Justis, much moved, clasped with his own, and pumped energetically.

“If I may interrupt this touching moment,” Vandeleur said behind him. “Finn’s making an ass of himself—over there, by the fire.”

The crowd in the Court had cleared somewhat as the students spread their merrymaking to the surrounding streets and taverns. Justis had a clear view of Finn’s wiry figure spiraling the bonfire, holding a stick that looked suspiciously like a linkboy’s unlit torch.

“He better keep his mouth shut,” Vandeleur remarked. “He’s drunk so much his breath’ll catch fire if he gets too close.”

“What’s he think he’s doing?” Justis asked uselessly. “He’s going to get burned!”

By twos and threes, the students remaining in the Great Court stopped whatever they were doing and watched Finn approach the fire, some calling out for him to come back, some urging him on. Blake headed toward the fire, shouting, “Don’t go any closer!”

He’d hardly taken three steps before he was surrounded by a small group of Northerners, all wearing oak-leaf badges and dozens of ribboned braids.

“Don’t, Justis.” Anthony Lindley was kneeling almost at Justis’s feet. His face was flushed and sweaty and stuck with tendrils of hair and loose ribbon. “You mustn’t try to stop him. He’s going to start the Hunt.”

“What hunt?”

“The Royal Hunt, Southron.” His informant was a vaguely familiar blond with wide-set eyes—Greenleaf, his name was. “The Hunt that feeds the Land.”

“The Land wants him to.” Lindley’s voice was reverent.

Justis spread puzzled hands wide. “It’s what we’ve always done back home,” Greenleaf explained with ironic kindness. “To make the Sun come again. A primitive ritual, but it seems to work.”

“He’ll lead us to the wood,” said one of his friends, “and we’ll hunt the Deer, and all will be as it should be.”

By this time, Lindley had taken in Justis’s tumbling hair and the leaf lying on his breastbone. “I see you bear the token. You’ll soon understand.”

Justis tugged at the leaf, intending to remove the token and then himself from his disquieting company, but was distracted when a gasp went up from the assembled students. He looked up to see Alaric Finn dart up to the bonfire, thrust his torch into it, and dance back again, waving the lighted brand triumphantly over his head.

“To the Wood!” Finn shrilled. “For the Hunt and the Sacrifice and the Feast of the Sun!”

Lindley scrambled to his feet and tossed back his tinkling braids. “The Wood!” he cried. “To the Wood!” And he held out his hands to his scarlet-faced lover, who embraced him one-armed. The students, Northern and Southern, opened a path for them, stamping and cheering and picking up the chant, “To the Wood! To the Wood!”

Without actually having decided to join them, Justis found himself running through the streets surrounded by young men with loose, flying hair and loose, flying gowns, shouting, “To the Wood!” at the top of his lungs. At one point, the man coursing next to him veered to one side, grabbed at a hanging shutter, and, after a brief struggle, tore it free.

“Wood!” he shouted. And the entire pack obeyed him, tearing apart a shack some hapless merchant had built against the side of his shop and running on again, each man carrying a stick or a plank, pursuing Finn’s torch and his hoarse cry: “To the Wood!”

As they rounded a corner, the torch stopped, and with it the panting, wild-eyed pack of students. Justis wiped his streaming face against his shoulder, suddenly conscious that his lungs burned, his legs ached, and his hands prickled with splinters from the board he carried. He heard a thick, aristocratic voice drawl, “What in the Seven Hells is this?”

As if in answer, Anthony Lindley’s clear tenor cried aloud: “The Deer! The Deer! Behold the Deer!”

Justis squinted. The light of Finn's torch danced on the astonished faces of three richly dressed young men standing at the mouth of the street. Two of them looked familiar. Before Justis could collect himself to think why, Lindley pointed at one of them, a long-haired beauty in green and gold, and cried again, "The Deer!"

The chosen young man's eyes flashed with reflected light as he gaped at the panting, growling pack. Then he darted down an alley with Finn behind him, and Greenleaf and his Northerners and Lindley and Vandeleur and Fremont and cautious, decent Justis Blake, shouting "The Deer! The Deer!" as they harried their quarry out of the city.

THERON LAUGHED AS HE RAN. HE KNEW THE STREETS and alleys of University—hadn't he been finding his way around them since he was old enough to walk? *I'll lead them to Riverside*, he thought, *and lose them there*. He grinned to think of the University crowd staggering helpless amidst the filth and carnival of a Riverside Last Night. They were on the broad Riverway now. Their torches threw his shadow up wild against the warehouses. In another minute, he would gain the lower bridge; he'd be home free.

But suddenly he was in a daze of light and shadow, howling faces, and the heat of upraised fire. They had come round him, somehow, cut off his access to the bridge. Someone thrust a flask at him—he seized it, took a long pull of some honey-sweet liquor, cast it away, and wheeled back around, toward the North Gate. It was like the games of tag he'd played with the twins at Katherine's on summer nights, roaming the lawn in all directions. But this was the dark night of the year, and maybe they would all keep running till the sun came up.

Ahead, through the gate, the cold night air was sweet and pure. The scent pulled him: trees were there, and clear-running streams, and the cry of owls. Theron broke through the gate with the pack behind him.

Hardly anyone was shouting now. His own breathing was loud in his throat, and he could hear gasps and grunts in his wake. His feet sucked up midwinter mud, but so did his pursuers'. He wondered what had become of his noble friends from the Hill. Were they among the panting pack, or had

they fled? Over the fields they all went, under moon and star, toward the tangle of the wood.

Something happened when he found himself amongst the trees. The torches were the only bright-colored thing in the black-and-silver world of the year's longest night. He couldn't tell tree from shadow of tree; he fought his way forward through stripes of illusion. But no longer did he lead them; he felt that he was being driven now, driven deeper into the wood, farther from the safety of the city. The spinning shadows made him dizzy. He closed his eyes and flung himself forward, hands outstretched, and felt before him nothing, a space, a clearing in the oak trees.

He was trapped. The men and their burning brands filled in the spaces between the trees, surrounding him with a ring of fire. He flung up his head, his nostrils flared, seeking a way out.

Around him the men began to sing, and to dance to their rough music. They were holding pieces of wood in their hands: torn-off shutters, bits of barrels, the spokes of a cartwheel. They flung them at the center, where Theron stood, so that he had to dance himself to avoid them. He understood words:

The Horn, the Horn, the King of Horn
Bless the day that he was born
Build the Fire around him high
New King in and Old King die!

The pile of wood grew at the center of the circle. Theron half-danced, half-staggered back into the arms of one of the men. It was Alaric Finn, who caught him and flung him across to another man, shouting, "The King! The King!" The next man caught him and held him tighter and longer—Theron felt the man's desire pressing hard against his thigh. He struggled and the man kissed him, biting his lips, before the shout went up and he was spun away to the arms of another—good god, it was Henry Fremont, hair disheveled and long face flushed. Fremont didn't kiss him. He gripped Theron's shoulders hard and stared at him with furious eyes, then flung him into the powerful arms of Justis Blake, who picked him right up off his feet and swung him around and around. Next was red-headed lovesick Anthony Lindley, who had fled from the sight of him naked that day at Basil's; this

time, Lindley looked him full in the face and whispered, "Welcome, my lord." It was worse than a kiss. Theron shut his eyes—but the bright flames of the torches burned through the lids. He heard the singing:

You who bear the brand
You who bear the flame
Cast away the old
Let the new year reign!

He struggled in Lindley's arms—they were both holding him now, Lindley and the proud Northerner, Alaric Finn, between them—and a tall man was holding the honey flask to his lips, tipping the sweet burning liquid down his throat. Everything was orange and black, even the people—*Ysaud would love this*, Theron thought. He seemed to have stumbled into one of her paintings, and now he was trapped in it.

Someone shoved a burning torch into his face. He pulled his arm from Lindley's to grasp it, and Finn cried, "Light it, my lord! Light the fire now, you bollocks, and bid the Sun return!"

Theron hurled the brand into the center of the pile of scavenged wood. A great cry went up around the circle; all the torches were flung in, and the fierce honey liquor went round. He heard singing and shouting. As the flames rose up, the men fell back from the bonfire. Some retreated into the shadows of the trees; he heard sharp cries of pleasure, mixed with howls that might have been bloody murder but were not.

No one held his arms; now was his chance to escape, to return to civilization and warmth and safety. He looked up, and froze at what he saw.

Across the fire, across the circle, a figure stood very still amidst the trees. It was green as new grass, and brown as old leaves. It stepped forward into the firelight and smiled at him.

It was the King Man: the man from his dreams, walking free as dreams may on this night of all nights. Theron recognized the heavy brows and thin-lipped mouth, the powerful shoulders and the bearskin that hung from them. And, exactly as in his dream, the man held out the cup and said, "Will you drink, my lord?"

Theron shook his head, *No*, but the King Man still came forward, walking through the fire, which settled at his feet.

"The old year is dead," the King Man said, "and the new not yet begun. The door is open between the worlds. The old kings are dead, and the Land cries out for a new one."

Theron stepped back, but there was a pool of water behind him now, a flat pool of water silver in the moonlight. He was afraid to look into it, afraid he might see the horns spring from his head.

Again the King Man offered him the cup. "I tell you this. You will drink before the year is out, from the pool or from the cup, it makes no matter. Between that time and this, however you run, you will always run to me." He reached down and took a fistful of brown oak leaves from the forest floor, and cast them in Theron's face. Theron smelt old earth and fresh mold, the debris of a hundred centuries; he tasted the land in the back of his throat, and clutched at the forest as it rained around him.

"Now, run!" The voice rumbled through his bones, and he ran.

HIS PILLOW OVER HIS HEAD, BASIL ST CLOUD ignored the noise of pounding as long as he could. There were plenty of drunks out tonight. He'd seen them as he made his way home from the festivities in the Great Hall, none too sober himself. Best to stay behind closed doors.

But then he realized that the door being pounded on was his. He rose and dragged himself to where he knew the door was, fumbled with the lock. His nose was assailed by wood smoke and dead leaves, and the sharp tang of a man he had lain with many times this year.

He clasped the man to him. "Theron," he whispered. But Theron said nothing. Basil pulled him in, and flung open a shutter so that a little starlight could enter.

Theron's hair was unbound, tangled like a skein the cat had played with. His gaudy festival clothes were muddy and torn. He stared at Basil mutely, his eyes wide and helpless.

"My dear, what is it?"

Theron shook his head, opened his hand. An oak leaf, crushed and dry, crumbled to nothingness.

"It's all right," Basil said. "It's all right." He smoothed the hair back from his lover's face. Theron's breath was pungent with liquor. His lips were

rough and cracked, but his mouth was still eager. Basil closed his eyes and saw himself falling into a sea of old green—holly leaves, bright against the midwinter snow, and ivy that grew up around him, twining around his legs, growing up to his forked crotch with the inevitable power of life.

His fingers were clenched in Theron's hair. Slowly he released them and looked down into his lover's face, where Theron knelt at his feet. The boy's face was a mask of passion. The edges of his mouth were stained with blood and seed. He did not look entirely human.

Basil searched himself for pity or concern and did not find them, only the hot flush of power over the creature he had before him. All questions of wealth and poverty, of Hill and University, of Theron's father and Basil's father, dissolved into nothing before that power. It was more than desire. There was something almost sacred about it, bright and consuming as the flames of a bonfire.

He began the slow removal of Theron's clothes. They were so wet, it was like peeling the skin from fruit. He uncovered the vine etched into Theron's chest. In the starlit darkness, it was like the shadow of leaves on his pale skin. Theron was trembling with cold, but Basil laid him down on the floor. In giving his lover ease, Basil took the boy's seed back into himself and never lost a precious drop.

Basil rose, intending to light a candle, to stir up the fire, but the power that had burned in his body was not yet done with him. The circle was not yet closed. *Bindings run in threes*, he thought, not knowing where the thought came from. It was as if he and Theron had just made some new thing between them, something that neither man could contain alone. It belonged to both of them, and must be passed back and forth between them as long as they both should live, growing in strength, always too much for either one to hold for long, always desiring outlet and renewal in the other.

Basil felt himself about to burst with it. He put his hands under Theron's arms, murmured, "Come, my lord, my dear…" and on the bed he sank himself deep, deep into his lover's body and filled it with the thing he could not name, that he had taken from him and now gave back, renewed and potent.

Theron cried out then, a loud keening wail that Basil thought must surely wake the city. He was deaf to his own shout of triumph, but he found

himself lying across the other man. His lust was spent, but words rose in his mind, words that must be said.

"Now," Basil whispered hoarsely; "now the old year is surely undone, and the fires are burnt out. Bind up your hair, my princeling, and fast for the white days passing between the old year and the new. Live on my love, as I shall live on yours."

Theron twisted under him, looking up at him mutely.

"Why do you not answer me? Answer me! The circle is complete, and bound in completion," Basil heard himself say, and knew that it was true. "I charge you, Theron—No, wait." Formally, he said: "Son of Tremontaine: Alexander Theron Tielman Campion, I charge you, speak!"

Theron gave a great gasp, filling his lungs as though coming up from deep water. "The hunt!" he cried.

Basil cradled him in his arms. "Hush," he said. "The hunt is over, you're with me. You did well."

"You know? How did you know?" Theron asked fiercely. "They were your men, those students; did you set them on?"

Basil's bonfire cooled to embers, his certainty fogged. "What do my students have to do with this?" he asked, bewildered. "What are you talking about? How did I know what?"

"About the hunt—those fucking barbarians—I was hunted, Basil, hunted like an animal—and they were your men, your men!"

"The King's Hunt." Basil leaned up on one elbow and looked at him. "I don't know; I was just being poetical, I suppose. Are you saying my students chased you tonight?"

"They were there—all of them—and those Northerners besides!"

"Yes…" It was hard to rouse himself, but Theron seemed genuinely upset, and history was all he had to offer. Basil considered the precedent. "I've heard that the village lads up around Hartsholt still bear the brand deep into the woods, and choose one of their own to run out before them. You should be flattered: it's always the bravest and handsomest they choose."

"Let them choose one of their own, then, and leave me alone!"

Basil stroked his lover's arm. "Shh. Don't you know, you are their own? In another age, you would have been their king—as you are mine."

Theron gripped his hand, stilling it, forcing Basil's attention to his words. "Tell me now. And tell me true. Did you put them up to this?"

Basil looked at him in real confusion. "I? How could I? Why would I?"

"I don't know; to see how it worked!"

Basil recoiled, offended. "I'm not teaching in a village school. We don't act out scenes from history as part of my lectures."

But Theron gripped harder. "What scene, Basil? What history were we all acting out for you?"

Basil twisted in his grasp. "Don't blame *me*. It's a tradition, I didn't invent it. The king is hunted—was hunted—for the good of the land. I wish I knew exactly how, and why. Maybe the Book of the King's W—" He caught himself just in time. "Maybe there are books I haven't read yet, that tell us more than Northern folk tales do. I do know that a few generations after the Union, in Laurent's day, they kept a young deer on the palace grounds. It was brought up by the royal children; the king's daughters would put garlands on its head. When the king's son came of age, they'd let it loose. He and his Companions would hunt it down on Last Night, and he always killed it with his own hands."

"That's in Vespas," Theron said. Distracted at last, he curled into Basil's arms. "I always thought that was a terrible thing to have to do, to hunt down an animal you'd cared for."

"That may have been the point. I think the deer was a substitute for the man himself. There's an ancient epic all about how the king *was* the deer, quite literally. Which could just be poetic license—unless you believe that the wizards somehow transformed him into an animal. Since that's impossible, it must have been a man they used to hunt—maybe a man clad in deerskin, or crowned with horns."

"Did they kill him when they caught him?"

"No. They made him king." Theron's head was heavy on his breast. "*He that was the deer has killed the deer*, it says in one poem, a fragment, probably a praise-song for a king. You love poetry; untangle me that one, and I'll make you an honorary historian."

"Your students hate me," Theron said sleepily. "They blame me for taking you away from them."

"You're mine," Basil murmured into his hair. "I will not let anyone harm you. You are my heart's delight, and the source of all my joy." He felt

Theron's breathing grow regular. He tucked a corner of blanket up around his bare shoulder. Theron twitched, and coughed, and coughed again. Basil reached across him for the cup of water he kept by the bed, and raised him up and offered it, saying, "Will you drink, my lord?"

Theron whimpered, more asleep than awake. Poor child, god knows how much wine he'd taken tonight, or worse. Basil put the cup to Theron's lips himself, and watched him drink, and laid him down again.

chapter III

Save for Last Night and First Night, the White Days had no names, no designations. They flowed together like the long nights, blurred by excess and its consequences. It was dark or it was light; one was more or less drunk or hungover; one was looking for a lover or enjoying one or, occasionally, sleeping.

At least that was how it seemed to Justis Blake, stunned by his first city experience of the turning of the year. The mad hunt through the city, the fire in the oak grove and what he had seen there, had shaken him. He remembered waking up at dawn almost lying in the warm embers of the fire, twisted up against the back of a man whose face was so black with smoke he couldn't even identify him. His clothes were tucked between his knees. With pounding head and frozen fingers he'd scrambled into them, found a stream to wash the taste from his mouth and assuage his raging thirst, and stumbled back to the city through the frosty morning, shivering in his bones.

He'd spent the afternoon in bed, swearing he'd never drink again. He should have known better, he told himself. Men did things when moved by whiskey and crowds they'd never do sober and alone. He'd allowed himself to be caught up in the heat of the moment, and was paying for it with a head filled with hammering dwarves and the uncomfortable knowledge that he wouldn't be able to write his mother all that he had done on Last Night.

"You were pissed," Benedict Vandeleur said when Justis tried to explain all this to him. "You went out with the boys in the woods and did some things you don't remember very well and saw boogie men and now you feel like the bottom third of the Sixth Hell. Serves you right. You should have come to Mother Ginger's with me. The girls don't charge on Last Night, and it's a lot warmer than an oak grove."

"It would have to be," said Justis gloomily. "You're probably right, Benedict, about all of it. I was certainly drunk."

"Of course I'm right," Vandeleur said. "Now, get out of bed and put your head under the pump and I'll show you how a real city man spends the White Days. And not a word about ancient history or oak groves or any of the rest of it until the term starts again, or I swear by all that's holy you can look for a new roommate."

Justis laughed, wincing when the dwarves picked up the pace of their hammering. But he got out of bed and dunked his head and the headache went away, just as Vandeleur had said it would. They went together to Mother Ginger's, and Justis kept his mouth shut on the subject of ancient history and oak groves. He thought about them, though, and his thoughts were not altogether comfortable.

JUSTIS BLAKE WAS NOT THE ONLY MAN IN THE CITY TO feel the effects of the Last Night hunt. The Northerners who called themselves the Companions of the King staggered into The Green Man to warm up and heal their heads with toasting the dawn of the Hunt. Robert Coppice, Third Companion, climbed onto a table with the help of Burl, his Fourth, and proposed a solemn toast to the shivering, hungover crowd: "Here's to our Hunt, boys, and a royal Deer to bring the Sun to the North Country!"

As they knocked back beakers of cider they pieced together their memories of the night. "Theron Campion." Coppice carefully shook his head. "Who would have thought it? Still, he gave us a good run, a mighty good run…"

"He did that," Burl agreed. "I thought I was going to bust a gut with running. Almost as good as the chase Finlay gave them in my grandfather's time, to hear the old ones talk."

"Did you see the horns on him?" a boy named Harwell said softly. "I did, I swear I did."

Greenleaf and Smith, First and Second Companions, had been oddly silent since their return from the woods. But at Harwell's words, Greenleaf nodded and asked eagerly, "You saw that, did you? What else did you see?"

"What didn't we see?" Hob chuckled. He was a natural scientist, but had thoroughly enjoyed himself nonetheless. "The Hunt was good, but the mead was even better!"

The First Companion quelled him with a glance. "Let Farwell answer."

"Just the horns," Farwell whispered. "But it might have been the trees… the branches, you know."

Greenleaf nodded. "I, too, saw the horns on him. And when I kissed him…Oh, lads—" His voice cracked; his companions saw that he was struggling not to weep. "Oh, my brothers, the time is truly upon us. We have been faithful servants of the Living Land, and it has not been in vain. The king will come again."

Someone snorted. "In Lord Theron Campion?"

"Hush," said Coppice, mindful of his rank. "The First Companion is speaking. He's Master of the Hunt and Keeper of the Mysteries. He knows."

"There are signs," Greenleaf went on. "I saw them, and Smith saw them, too."

Will Smith finally raised his head. His cheeks were scratched, his hair was full of twigs. He looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge backward, which was close to the truth. But his eyes were clear blue flame. "It was a great mystery," Smith said hoarsely. "Around the fire, I saw the ancient tales live again. There was the Deer, the king that will be, and from the woods there came a man, dark and fell, with power lying like a mantle on his shoulders." He glared at Hob. "Other years I have drunk deep of the mead, and seen nothing like this. This was true seeing."

"We will watch, and we will wait," Greenleaf said. "If the signs hold true, the king will reveal himself with the year's turning, springing from amongst us as the new grass springs from the earth. A wizard will bind him, as the kings of old were bound, and the Companions will honor him and call him brother. The old order will be restored, and the Land will rejoice and we will rejoice with it—" He choked on the words, tears running openly down his face.

Coppice put his hand on Greenleaf's shoulder and kissed him, as was his right. "Rest," he told his friend. "It was a long night. And the days are long until spring. There will be time to speak of this."

His arm around his lover Lindley, Alaric Finn glowed with pleasure and returning warmth. "You saw the Deer," he crooned in Lindley's ear. "You saw him first, and you knew him. You are truly one of us."

OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY, THE LAST NIGHT HUNT had other consequences. The City Council was besieged with complaints from property owners who had lost shutters and wagons and sheds to the rioters. And Lord Nicholas Galing's man brought him a letter from Henry Fremont.

Something happened last night. Northern royalists in the wood. At the bonfire, too. Finn's friends. Finn started something, about the kings. Don't think he's the leader, though. Who'd follow Finn? If he didn't have a brand, I mean. Anybody'd follow a Brand on Last Night.

Nicholas laid the letter on his knee, took a sip of wine, picked up the cloth packet the letter had been attached to, and slit through the dirty folds with his paper-knife. Cloth and string fell apart to reveal a roughly-carved wooden oak leaf like the brooch Arlen had shown him, threaded on a leather thong.

He grinned down at this MidWinter's gift with pure joy. "Thank you, Henry," he murmured, and returned to the letter with renewed determination. He needed it. Henry Fremont had been neither calm nor sober when he'd written it.

I just got back. Want to get it all down before I forget.

Just what had really happened wasn't very clear. Fremont mentioned running through the streets, chasing a Deer (with a capital "D") into the

woods, a bonfire, men dancing. Nicholas huffed impatiently and read on until, swearing, he reached for the bellpull and rang it as though it were Henry Fremont's scrawny neck. He told the manservant who answered to take a chaise to an address in University Town, roust Henry Fremont out of his bed, if necessary, and bring him back within the hour.

When the servant had bowed himself out, Nicholas reread the passage that had caught his attention.

Theron Campion was the Deer. Lindley's revenge for Campion stealing St Cloud from him, I think. Not that Lindley ever had a chance. He's with Finn now anyway. But the point is, Lindley and Finn said T.C. was the King, and T.C. ran, and we chased him and when we caught him we passed him around the circle and called him King and he did not object.

It wasn't much. As it stood, it was little more than drunken babble, but it was definitely worth pursuing. Nicholas scribbled a note to Tielman, then crumpled it up and threw it on the fire. Time enough to consult Ned when he had more facts, and the time to think what they might mean. The names, though: Lindley and Finn and Campion. He ought to send those to Arlen, as a little MidWinter's offering of his own.

What was taking so long? Where was the damn boy?

In spite of all the manservant's best efforts, it was almost two hours before Henry Fremont was shown into Nicholas Galing's study. A day's rest hadn't seemed to do his hangover much good. His long face was the greenish-white of a fish's belly, his pointed nose was raw, and his deep-set eyes were watery and bloodshot. But he was shaven, neatly dressed, and tolerably in command of his senses. He glowered at Nicholas and said, "I'm sick as a dog, as I told your man when he woke me. He didn't seem to think you cared."

Nicholas gestured to a chair opposite his own. "On the contrary, my dear Fremont, I do care. Very much."

Fremont's air of sullen suspicion did not change, but he took the offered chair. "You want to ask me about the letter, I suppose. Well, I can't tell you any more than I've written there. It was a very confusing night."

"I'm sure it was," Nicholas said dryly. "Let's not worry about that right now, shall we? I'm interested in something that happened before Last Night."

"Nothing happened before Last Night," said Henry sullenly. "Nothing very interesting, anyway. You have my letters. Why ask me about them now? Shouldn't you be out with the other nobles, eating apprentices and fucking apricots? Or is it the other way around?"

He really didn't look well, Galing thought. He'd undoubtedly caught a cold cavorting in the wood, and served him right. Aloud, he said pleasantly, "You didn't mention this in your earlier letters." He handed Fremont a page with one sentence underscored. "What does this mean?"

Fremont squinted red-rimmed eyes at the page. "Plaguey cheap pen," he muttered. "Can't read my own…Ah—'revenge for Campion stealing St Cloud,' is that what you mean? Seems clear enough to me. Lindley wanted St Cloud in the worst way, got his nose put out of joint when St Cloud took up with Campion instead. Naming Campion the Deer could have been his way of getting back at him. But that's not the point I was trying to make. My point was…"

"Yes, I know what your point was," Galing interrupted him. "It's an interesting one, and we'll talk about it later. What I want to know about at the moment is this affair between Doctor Basil St Cloud and Lord Theron Campion. How long has it been going on?"

Fremont stared at him. "Who cares? It's just two men in bed—that's not politics, that's gossip. You didn't tell me you were interested in gossip."

I can't hit him, Galing reminded himself. He won't tell me anything if I hit him. "Two men in bed is indeed politics," he said patiently, "if one of them is a king-mad ancient historian and the other is a descendant of the last king's sister."

"Yes, of course he is." Fremont grimaced. "I hadn't thought it through." He sneezed explosively and wiped his dripping nose on his sleeve. "I don't suppose you've got a handkerchief?"

Galing rang for a handkerchief and a lemon toddy. While Fremont was using the former and absorbing the latter, Galing coaxed from him all he knew about Doctor Basil St Cloud's liaison with Lord Theron Campion. It wasn't much, but it was enough to make Galing curious about young Campion's politics.

In short order, he packed Fremont off in a chaise with blankets and a basket of food and wrote a polite note to Lord Arlen, containing what he thought Arlen should know about the events of Last Night. Then he

flipped through the invitations for MidWinter festivities piled on his mantelpiece, selected the one that promised the greatest opportunities for unbridled gossip, hastily changed his clothes, and set off for Lord Davenant's all-day card party.

When Galing emerged from Davenant House some hours later, he was the richer by two pressing invitations to intimate suppers, a respectable sum in gold, and a confusing portrait of Lord Theron Campion, heir to Tremontaine. According to the men at Lord Davenant's, Theron Campion was without shame and easily offended, spoiled and generous, overeducated and ignorant, boorish and charming, unattainable and easy as a wink and a nod, a fribble and a philosopher. Not very conclusive.

The most fruitful conversation he'd had was over a hand of Constellations he'd played with the Lords Condell and Filisand and young Lord Clarence Randall. Galing himself had proposed the game as the four men stood eating steamed river clams from a huge silver bowl on a sideboard. He'd chosen his partners carefully. Filisand was the Raven Chancellor, Condell enjoyed *a* reputation for knowing all the best gossip, and Clarence—well, Lord Clarence was newly on the town, rich, and not very skilled at Constellations.

Galing introduced the topic of Theron Campion as Lord Filisand accepted a pack of cards from a servant and broke the seal between his thick, red fingers.

"Theron Campion?" Lord Condell pulled at the frill of lace edging the sleeves of his admirably tailored coat. He was a handsome man, all porcelain and gilt like a mantel clock, and every bit as alive to the time of day. "You're not thinking of pursuing *him*, are you, my dear? Because, if you are, you might wish to reconsider. He's lovely, I agree, but sadly unsteady."

"What Condell's trying to say, Galing," said blunt Lord Filisand, shuffling the cards, "is that you don't want to get mixed up with the Campions. Sadly unsteady! That's very funny, Condell. They're all mad as swordsmen—including the widow."

"Lady Sophia isn't a Campion; not by blood, anyway," Lord Clarence pointed out. He was very young and eager, like a half-broken colt, and flush with the triumph of being asked to play Constellations in such exalted company.

Lord Filisand began to deal out the deck. "She's mad anyway. What would you call a woman who presented herself at the Surgical Theatre not a month after her husband's death, gravid as a sow, declaring that she was going to be a surgeon?"

"Courageous?" offered Lord Nicholas with deliberate provocation. "Determined?"

"Mad," said Filisand firmly. He picked up his cards and pursed his full-lipped mouth over them. It made him look rather like a river-pike, if river-pikes wore yellow velvet.

"Unwise, certainly," Condell temporized, "if Lady Sophia were a woman who cared what is said of her. As she is not, and was backed by the Duchess Tremontaine, laying siege to the College of Physic wasn't an unreasonable way of getting what she wanted."

"Sounds a redoubtable woman," said Galing, sorting his hand. "And young Campion takes after her, you say?"

Lord Filisand snorted. "Takes after both parents; that's the trouble. No morals. No shame. No sense of civic duty. Only time the old duke took his seat in Council was when he had some scheme to upset things. Whatever else you may say about the Duchess Katherine, she's conscientious. And she's discreet in her amours, if she has any. Unlike the old duke."

Galing examined his hand. "And unlike his son?"

Lord Condell pouted thoughtfully. "I wouldn't say Campion is indiscreet, precisely. I can't actually furnish you with the names of any of his lovers. Except Ysaud, of course."

Lord Filisand laid down the Sun. "I open, I think."

Galing sat up straighter, a hound on the scent. "Land, I'd forgotten that bit of gossip. So Ysaud was really his mistress, was she?" He threw down the Hunter.

"More likely he was hers," tittered Condell, covering the Hunter with a Comet.

Lord Filisand discarded a minor star and snapped, "Are we here to play or to gossip? Lord Condell takes the first constellation. Lord Nicholas, do you care to lead?"

Galing led the Six-pointed Crown and lost the constellation to Condell's Eclipse, a tyro's error. But his mind was not on the cards. As it happened, several years ago he'd had occasion to give Ysaud a commission

—six small paintings to illustrate a favorite book. He'd discussed them with her, approved the sketches, visited once to check on her progress and been told that if he came again, she would paint over the canvases. There had been a lively argument, which he had let her win. He'd seen her only once more, when he'd gone to view the paintings. It was time, he thought, to see her again.

THAT NIGHT, ANTHONY LINDLEY AND ALARIC FINN slept curled together, naked in Finn's narrow bed. There was a half-bottle of cheap wine on the floor beside them and a plate of crumbs and apple cores from their supper. The University Clock struck two as the rickety wooden stairs shook under the booted tread of six City Guardsmen and the door groaned under the blows of their truncheons. Finn shouted for the unknown torturers to go away and buried his head under the pillow. A moment later, the cheap lock burst with a crack, and his tiny room was filled with the flare of a torch and large, unsmiling men who hauled him and the whimpering Lindley out of their nest, bundled them into their gowns, and dragged them, barefoot, dazed, and shivering, out of the room, down the stairs, and into a box-like carriage with straw on the floor and no windows.

The carriage drove to the Chop, where more Guards escorted the shaken, bewildered pair to a stone cell furnished with a straw pallet, a blanket, a bucket with a lid, and a tin ewer of water.

Time passed. Lindley shivered and clung to Finn, who had little comfort to offer him. At one point, the banded oak door opened and some clothes were tossed in. The boys dressed and waited some more. Lindley might even have dozed, exhausted by terror, with his head on Finn's shoulder. And then there were guards again, and torchlight scorching their eyes, and a tall man with a deep, silky voice, saying, "So you are the young men who like to hunt deer on Last Night. Come and tell me all about it."

THE SAME MORNING THAT SAW LINDLEY AND FINN IN the Chop saw a note from Katherine delivered to Riverside House requesting Theron's immediate presence at Tremontaine House. Sophia read it, shook her head,

and rang for Terence, who said woodenly that Lord Theron's bed had not been slept in that night, but he'd no doubt return in time for the duchess's sledding-party. Which he did, barely. He was still wearing the brocade he'd put on for Last Night, sadly ripped and soiled. He was unshaven, scratched, and glowingly happy from two nights and a day of perfect love.

The Campion butler, a retired swordsman named Sly Davy, had been standing by the door at Lord Theron's private entrance, ready to open it as soon as he appeared. "Happy MidWinter!" Theron greeted him cheerfully.

Davy twisted his scarred face into a truly hideous scowl and muttered, "Maybe for some." Since he was always full of dire warnings, Theron swept on past him with a grin.

But he stopped at the sight of his mother, who'd been waiting for him in the antechamber. She took in his appearance with tightened lips and lifted chin. When he saw how angry she was, his face fell. "Oh, dear. You didn't know where I was. I should have sent a note, shouldn't I?" When she didn't respond, he tried a smile. "Just let me get cleaned up and changed, and I'll do whatever penance you choose."

"Bathe and shift your clothes you must," Sophia said stiffly. "You are disgusting. It is not I who will punish you, however, but the duchess, who sent this morning and is waiting for you still." She blinked, and Theron saw a tear slide by her nose. He held out his hand, and her uncharacteristic restraint dissolved.

"Pestilent boy!" she cried in her mother tongue. "Brother of goats! I've heard such things, I don't know what to believe. What have you done? Katarina is furious, and I am ashamed of you, and of myself for being your mother."

Theron put himself to the task of calming her, which wasn't hard, her tempers being as brief as they were rare. He wrote a contrite note to the duchess promising to come as soon as he was decent, and rushed up the stairs, stripping off his filthy coat and shirt as he went. He burst into his room where Terence was waiting with a bath before the fire and the razors laid out. "The suit is ruined," he announced, "and I'm as filthy as a dockman. Can you turn me back into a duke's son again in less than an hour?"

Terence, who was fond of his rackety and generous young master, frowned sternly. "I might contrive, sir, if you do as you're told and don't

distract me."

Not much more than an hour had passed before Theron presented himself to his mother, clean and rosy and freshly clothed in fine blue wool. Sophia embraced him warmly when she saw him, but all she said was, "Where is your hat? You'll catch your death, going out with wet hair."

Theron bit back an objection and stepped into the chair waiting at the door without saying that he'd rather walk to the Bridge where a carriage waited to take him up the Hill to Tremontaine House.

The sledding had ended with the short MidWinter day. When Theron came into the tall and glowing entry-hall, children of both sexes and every age between five and fifteen were running up and down the long, shallow sweep of the grand staircase, screaming at the tops of their lungs. Marcus's wife, Susan, stood at the bottom with her hands folded at her waist, watching them.

"We just came in," she said in greeting. "They'll all collapse soon. Katherine's in the library, Theron. If I were you, I'd leave your high horse at the door."

Theron kissed her round cheek. "I'll leave it here for you to keep an eye on. Is she very angry?"

"Livid," said Susan calmly. "Andy, watch that little boy. He'll be over the banister in a minute."

Theron composed himself and entered the library. His mind and body were still flushed with love; and the hot bath and careful grooming, the crisp, fresh linen and the hot brick in the carriage had done nothing to dispel his sense of well-being. He had no idea what the duchess was in a tear about, but he'd find out soon enough. I'll give up anything but Basil, he thought.

Katherine's cheeks were still scarlet from the sledding. She looked Theron up and down and smiled icily. "Transformation," she said. "From young thug-about-town to noble scion of Tremontaine. It's wonderful how you do that, Theron."

A cold spot grew in his spine. "Cousin," he said formally, "whatever ill you have heard of me has gravely upset Sophia. She can't even get the words out."

"Don't you think," Katherine answered civilly, "that it's time you stopped hiding behind the affection we all feel for your mother?"

He felt the blood leave his face. She was a woman, she was his kin and his superior in rank. He could not strike her. "Are you going to tell me what I've done, or just insult me?"

"I am waiting for an apology."

"For *what*, in god's name?"

She drew a deep breath. "Theron. You've never lied to me—and believe me, I would know. That leaves only the equally unsavory possibility that you were so outrageously drunk on Last Night that you have absolutely no memory of leading a gang of drunken students on a rampage through University and out the North Gate, terrorizing citizens and pulling down property as you went." Her clear eyes gazed at him, leaving him no grace.

"I don't—" he stammered. "It wasn't like that."

"What was it like, then," she said snidely, "the Battle of Pommerey? At least you don't deny it. That's a good place to start. Which is nice, since quite a few people saw you at the head of your little army. Some of your scholarly friends have been picked up for questioning; I'm surprised you don't know that. Your intelligence isn't very good, I guess, or you just don't care. But you may thank me, when you've a mind, for keeping you out of the Chop along with them. Or if you've no mind to thank me for anything, thank the House of Tremontaine. By god, Theron!" she exploded. "It's not as though we ask much of you. You have your books, your studies, even your colorful assortment of sweethearts—nobody says a word, we deny you nothing—all we ask is that you keep our name clean. And you repay us by making yourself into a civic menace!"

She stopped, hands clenched on the back of a chair, waiting for Theron to say something. Theron returned her glare for glare, choked on the unfairness of her accusation. All he ever did was worry about keeping the family name clean. He'd pulled back a hundred times from serious misdemeanors of the kind his friends indulged in; he even went to boring parties on the Hill when he'd rather be studying or lying in the arms of someone he loved. But what could he tell her? *I didn't lead them; I was being chased.* Or maybe, *I didn't start it. They did.*

"There's more—" he began. "More to it than that."

"More?" she asked, nostrils flared. "How much more?"

He drew his shoulders back. "Speak to Peter Godwin. Or to Sebastian Hemmynge. They were there, too; they saw. You have no regard for me or

for my word. Ask them."

"I may," she said. "Meanwhile, have you any objection if restitution is made to the city out of your Highcombe revenues? I hold them in trust, and I want to be scrupulous."

"Of course." It wasn't as though the students actually responsible could pay for anything, he knew. Dimly, he wondered what sort of damage had been wrought in the chase through the city streets. Wood, probably, for that awful bonfire. He had known nothing but the exhilaration and terror of the hunt.

"Good. And I do trust your word. I will have it, in fact, that for the remainder of the holiday you will confine yourself to Riverside House."

"What? Oh, no."

"Oh, you are free to attend all the parties you've already accepted invitations for, or to go about on visits with your mother."

"What purpose would my going out in society serve, if I've already been exposed as a thug?"

She looked surprised. "But you haven't been, Theron. That's what I've been telling you. We've made sure that as few people as possible know of your involvement in this."

"Thanks to Tremontaine." It came out more bitterly than he'd meant.

"If you like," she said dryly. "Have I your word?"

"I—No. I cannot give it." Katherine waited, eyebrows raised. "I have a friend—a lover, at University. Not…one of the rampaging gang. A magister. He would take it very ill if I were to abandon him now."

"You may write him a note."

"He wouldn't understand. He thinks—he believes a nobleman is master of his own life. And, unlike you, he believes me a man grown."

"Does he, now?" Her contempt was palpable. "Well, we wouldn't want to disappoint him."

Theron had been in trouble with her before, but it hadn't been like this: she'd never fully unleashed her cold, pure power on him as if he were an adult, an equal, an enemy. "Katherine." He held out a hand toward her. "Please. I am sorry—most heartily sorry—to have offended you and…to have done what I did on Last Night. I promise, it won't happen again, or anything like it."

"See to it." She turned away, her business done—but then relented. "Theron." She leaned across the table to him. "You may piss away the duchy if you like—I don't have to threaten to deprive you of Tremontaine, you know as well as I do what steps you might take to lose it. But don't make us all ashamed of you."

His eyes pricked with foolish tears. "I think of you," he said, "more than you know."

She held out her hand, and he took it and kissed it, without flourish.

LORD NICOLAS GALING HAD NOT SENT A NOTE TO SAY he was coming, and perhaps he should have. But he felt that the less time Ysaud had to prepare herself and her studio against his visit, the more he would have the advantage. What advantage, he was not sure—but it was always nice to have one. Especially where Ysaud was concerned. He was just pleased that she was still in town and working during the MidWinter Festival, instead of off enjoying the hospitality of some patron's country house.

It was a gray day, and late. She'd be running out of natural light at any moment. He was counting on it. Meanwhile, Galing threw another stick on the fire her servant had left him with. Nothing but sticks—no logs. Tiresome, and vaguely insulting—but one couldn't mind that with Ysaud; it was a part of doing business with her.

"Would you care to see my latest?"

He straightened swiftly. The artist stood in the doorway behind him, letting in a draft. The small woman, dressed in a gray robe lined with squirrel fur, was not troubled by it. "I doubt it would appeal to you, though: nymphs. I'm doing a whole frieze of them."

"Oh? For whom?"

She smiled. "You'll see. It will be very grand: a staircase. I'll cartoon it, and let some apprentice do the painting."

He followed her into her studio. It looked as if it had been a ballroom once, with long, uncurtained windows and tall mirrors lining the walls to make the most of the light. It was cluttered with canvases at various stages of composition and a model's stand and a sofa and closed stoves set up in the marble fireplaces—hardly elegant, but workmanlike and warm. As it

would have to be, if Ysaud's models were as naked as the work on the easel. She was right; it didn't appeal to him. "Not your usual," he said.

The artist shrugged. "'My usual.' What's that?"

He looked closer. "This is nothing but shapes. Lines and shadow."

"Well, it is going to be a frieze. I see it as a timeless dance. Beautiful women—with nowhere to go." She laughed.

"It's all…form," Galing concluded. "There's no drama. Usually your pictures imply a story, even if you're not referring to an actual historical event."

"Oh. You mean like this?" She strolled over to a large canvas facing the wall, and pivoted it on one corner till it faced Lord Nicholas.

He was looking through a frame of dark, painted leaves: oak, mostly, and some holly, densely layered. The scene at the center was a glade: pale moonlight, and a bonfire with dancing figures flashing black and gold around it. The figures were naked, young, the leap of their long hair echoing the leap of the flames. The leaves crowded around them, hiding shadows: a stag, a bear, a wolf, a boar. Except for the shadows, it might have been a rustic Last Night—or a group of drunken students dancing in the wood.

"This is new," he said, careful to hide his excitement.

"A few months. I thought it might be in your style."

"Why mine?"

She grinned at him, her pointed face foxy. "Lord Nicholas, really. I remember your specifications perfectly well."

"Truly," he went on, ignoring her reference to his last commission; "it's quite wonderful. Have you got any more like it?"

"Nearly two dozen. But not for sale."

"Oh? Private commission?"

"Hardly. Where would anyone put them all?"

"What are you going to do with them?"

She frowned. "I'm really not sure. It was enough just to have done them. For now."

She pulled out another. Even with the huge windows and the mirrors, the fading light made things look powdery and illusory. Curiously, the paintings seemed more alive than any other thing in the studio. The second canvas was a more reasonable size. It showed a man's torso, lit by

moonlight, rising from behind a holly bush. The head was out of the frame—but beyond the figure, on the ground, was the shadow of a stag's antlers.

Galing felt his skin crawl. "What is this?" he breathed.

"You mean, *who*?" she said smugly. "That's just it, isn't it? Nice-looking fellow."

"Oh, come." He was suddenly annoyed. "Everyone knows who, if it's last year's work. It was all over town."

"Be nice." She considered another canvas, then made a great show of putting it back unseen, and instead opened a portfolio and presented him with a demure sketch: a young man, fully dressed in antique clothes. His face was arresting: she'd captured an odd mix of the sensual and the austere. Galing studied it for a long time.

"You know my young friend, then?"

Galing could not swear he'd never seen Lord Theron Campion. It was more than likely that they'd been at the same balls or parties—he might even have spoken with him. But he certainly had never seen him through the eyes of the artist.

"I know of him," said Galing mildly. "This is quite remarkable. May I see the final work?"

"It didn't come out. I painted over it. This was the best of the studies."

"A historical piece. One of the old kings?"

"Yes, he was good at kings."

"I expect it's the hair. The old kings always look like today's scholars to me."

"Oh, if it's hair you like—" Ysaud wrestled with another canvas, propped it against the wall for his inspection. But the light really was going, now; all he could discern was a pattern of light and dark. She brought forward a branch of candles, and the scene sprang to life.

A pool in the forest, flat and bright. A man knelt by it, naked from the waist up. He seemed to be gazing into the pool; his face was hidden by a fall of hair, some of it braided with ribbon. His arms were braced against the pool's edge; his hands were tense. What he stared at so intently, reflected back from the water, was the muzzle of a deer. A stag.

It all really happened, Henry Fremont wrote. *Theron Campion was the Deer…they said Theron was the King…*

And Galing had further intelligence, now, forwarded from the Chop. They had not wanted him in at the questioning, but at least Arlen had sent him this:

Question: *I know you hunted the deer on Last Night.*
But why did you call him the king?

Prisoner: *I did not. I never did.*

Q: *Your friends did. Why?*

P: *The deer is the king. The king of the year.*

Q: *The old year, or the new?*

P: *Neither, both; it's kind of complicated, please don't—*

Q: *Why is the deer the king?*

P: *It has always been so.*

"Well, well," said Galing. "He had some bizarre ideas, your noble subject."

"Don't talk nonsense," the painter said. "It wasn't his place to have ideas."

"You mean you—oh, come, Madam Ysaud, really. You paint to sell, or so you've told me. Often. Your time is valuable, not to be wasted, I remember. Why create a dozen, two dozen canvases for nothing, for no one? Campion can afford them." He paused, smiling maliciously. "Was that the cause of your split? Not a lovers' quarrel, but a lover's commission? Did he refuse to pay up? Didn't he like the work?"

"You go too far," she said, and turned away, leaving Galing and the painting in darkness. "I should not have shown you any of these."

Galing's ears pricked at her tone. She was uncomfortable, perhaps frightened. He needed to know why. "You still haven't told me," he reminded her. "Where do these come from?"

"From him, from Theron."

This was promising. "Then he *did* suggest these—these bizarre images. How? What did he say?"

He'd followed her to the center of the room, where she stood islanded in light. She cocked her head insolently at him. "He didn't s*a*y anything, Lord Nicholas."

"Books, then; did he show you books?"

"Oh, honestly. What would I want with books? He showed me his body. It spoke to me, and this is what it said. I used to watch him when he was asleep—and other times. The pictures grew up around him."

She was lying, he thought; or she was a little mad. Or the whole thing was an absurd coincidence. Which didn't seem likely.

"So what did he think of these pictures he 'gave' you?"

"He hated the whole thing. But he was in love with me. He complained nonstop about posing, but he'd do anything I asked him to. Here, look at this."

A young man lay spread-eagled on his back, at the heart of an oak grove. The pure white of his skin was streaked with scratches, as though he'd been running naked through the wood. His head was tilted back, his throat exposed as though waiting for a lover's kiss—or for a knife.

"He enjoyed that one," she chuckled; "a little too much: I had a hellish time getting the shadows right, just there…" She pointed to where a scattering of oak leaves and shadows hid his private parts. "Shall I show you why?"

Without waiting for an answer she delved into another portfolio and offered up a drawing in reddish chalk: the same man, but his pose was held by ropes binding his wrists and ankles to posts—probably bedposts, Nicholas thought. In the sketch, there was no mistaking the face of the young nobleman, though in the painting it had been obscured. The figure's eyes were still shut, his head tilted back, but his member was fully erect. A painted vine embraced his chest and hip as if it loved him.

"Distracting," murmured Nicholas.

"Not to me. Here's another."

Campion again, unbound this time: asleep, or maybe only sated, in the middle of a rumple of sheets, one arm flung luxuriously away from himself.

"Did Lord Theron understand," Nicholas breathed, "just what you were doing?"

Ysaud smiled affectionately at the sketch. "About half the time, he did. He couldn't stop me drawing, could he? But the paintings never show his face, except in one or two decent, historical ones. Those I could sell, actually. They couldn't possibly offend anyone: in fact, some nobles think it's an honor to pose for those. You, Lord Nicholas, you'd make a very nice Duke Tremontaine—the historical one, I mean, the King Killer—a man in his prime, in command of his power…much better than poor Theron, despite his lineage. Though if we go back far enough, you're all interbred, I suppose. I see it all the time in the old portraits: a modern Karleigh nose on an ancient Lord Horn, and so forth."

"I would be honored to be the King Killer—some day. With young Campion as King Gerard?"

"Tremontaine would never forgive me. You don't paint a family that important as one of the great villains of history." She glanced up at him with bright malice. "Really, Galing, do you know nothing of politics!" Galing smiled and shrugged. "You know, he came to me at first for a sitting," she went on. "His cousin, the duchess, admires my work. She owns a couple already—a *Rosamund's Bower*, I think, and a swordsman genre piece. The duchess wanted a portrait of her heir apparent. One thing led to another."

"I'm sure it did. But how did he like you doing *these*?" Galing shook the handful of drawings.

"Oh, those. Those are for you."

"For—me?"

"Yes, don't you like them?"

Galing felt the blood pounding in his veins. She knew perfectly well just what he liked. "You are remarkably generous, Madam Ysaud."

"Not at all." She pulled another few sketches, rolling them up before he could see what they were. "A compliment to a friend. Here, I'll wrap them up for you myself."

chapter IV

THERE WERE NO CLASSES DURING THE WHITE DAYS. But Basil warned Theron that he intended to spend most of them working on something important.

"Don't you want me?" Theron asked, hurt.

Basil smiled. "Do I look as if I don't want you?" He took Theron's face in his hands. "Understand, my dear; this is my one time free of lectures, free of students—time to get some real work done."

The truth was, he found it easier to resist poring over the book of spells when Theron did not visit. He didn't tell him that; nor did he tell him that he was looking for proof of something he could use to call Roger Crabbe a liar—something that didn't involve wizards and magic. He still hadn't told Theron about the academic challenge. Sometimes he hardly believed himself that he'd earnestly committed to it with three of his closest friends, and that, come the new year, they would be expecting him to have something to debate, something fresh and exciting, something tied in to his latest work on the Northern kings and their successors. Seduced by the wizards' book and his noble lover, he had fallen behind on his true work, the slow steady plumbing of source texts and notes for the book he was going to write. He should be strict with himself, for once. "Besides," Basil said, "I thought your days would be full of parties. Family. That sort of thing."

"They are," Theron said glumly. "Well, they don't have to be—I can get out of the worst of them—but as you're so busy…"

"Not every day." Basil kissed him, nearly poking his eye out with the quill he'd stuck behind his ear. "I'm not busy every day. But if we spent the White Days all in bed—what could we hope for in the new year?"

Theron scowled. “We are meant to spend the White Days in self-improvement, conducting ourselves as we mean to go on in the coming year. So you will be working hard, and I will attend more parties. Charming.”

“Think rather,” Basil traced his cheek, “that we are storing up virtue. Getting it out of the way, if you like.”

Theron tried to think of it that way. He also remembered Katherine’s warning and even, to his annoyance, his cousin Talbert’s humiliating lecture at the Godwin party. Very well, he would be the model heir, escort his mother to all conceivable gatherings on the Hill, and leave no one to wonder where he was spending the rest of his time. It was one thing to be notorious with Ysaud. He had no desire to let the Hill crowd know about his scholarly lover.

THAT EVENING, THERON CAMPION STOOD IN HIS WARM room in Riverside House while Terence dressed him. Fine linen against his skin, followed by layers of more linen, stiff with embroidery, then brocaded silk, rounded with collar and cuffs of lace. His long hair was brushed and oiled and clipped in a golden buckle, a heavy gold chain laid around his neck. It weighed him down, but it had been a gift from the duchess, and he thought it would be expedient to wear it. He had eaten nothing for hours; come rushing home from Basil’s after his mother had already dined, with barely enough time to bathe and change for the Montague ball. His consequent pallor and his hair gave him an antique air his lover would have approved of.

The ball was already crowded when Theron and Sophia arrived. He left her with a group of noble ladies presided over by her old friend Lady Godwin, then swam and bowed his way through the brightly dressed throng toward the refreshments. A hand at his elbow stopped his progress: “Young Campion! Pried you away from your books, have we?”

He was in a knot of men he’d known since he was a child, men he’d played at swordsmen with, men he’d ridden with, men he’d gone drinking with, even men he’d kissed. Now they wanted to talk about politics and the latest gossip. He wondered what they’d make of Basil, or Basil of them.

Contempt and incomprehension all around, he suspected; it was hard even to think of them in the same breath.

Everyone was laughing—someone must have made a witty remark. Theron smiled mechanically and took a glass of wine from a passing tray. He began to feel much better after he'd downed it.

A fragile-looking girl with dark hair came into view just past the swirl of pattern in the padded shoulders around him. Her hair was severely upswept, exposing delicate ears. The shadowy tendrils that escaped onto her neck served to enhance its frailty.

Ralph Perry followed Theron's look. "Ah!" he said archly. "The true purpose for our sojourn in these parts: the flowers in the garden of maidenhood, ripe for the plucking."

"Perry!" Clarence Randall expostulated. "I hope you don't mean my sister!"

"Plucking," explained Perry smoothly, "is a very considerable enterprise, involving ladders of contracts, baskets of jewels, and books of vows."

"*Is* it your sister?" Theron asked Randall.

"*It's* not the cat, you rogue!"

But in the end, he achieved his introduction to the young beauty. Lady Genevieve Randall smiled shyly; she was fresh from the schoolroom, and had been told that it was better to play up her freshness and innocence than to pretend to a sophistication she lacked. Her skin was fine and flawless, with a ripe-peach glow; Theron had to stop himself from reaching out to touch it just to feel it under his fingers. Even her shoulders, bare in their calyx of lace, were round and shone faintly golden in the flattering candlelight.

But he might take her hand if he asked her to dance, and so he did. They trod the measures of a slow *pas*, and he was careful to exert no pressure of the fingers that might alarm her. He could not help looking, though, at the wisps of dark hair at the base of her neck as the two of them moved back and forth, gravely dipping and bobbing. A sheen of moisture appeared on her upper lip; he wished he might bend down and lick it off.

Her mother met them as they came off the dance floor. Lady Randall knew all about him; it was a mother's business to know what there was to know about men of marriageable age. She inquired first after his mother's health and then after his studies and his cousin the duchess, to let him

know that she understood both his own priorities and his standing in the world's eyes. Theron took pains not to say anything particularly original, so as not to alarm her. His efforts were rewarded by a motherly smile and the information that the Randall ladies received in the mornings, should he care to call.

COMING DOWN THE STAIRS FROM THE CARD ROOM, Lord Nicholas Galing stopped and stared at a young man with clubbed hair bowing to a majestic lady in purple and feathers. There was something about the tilt of the young man's head, the slope of his nose, the set of his shoulders that tugged at Galing's memory. The young man straightened and turned toward a group of young bloods in their first season.

"Dammit, Galing," said the Duke of Karleigh at his shoulder. "Warn a man when you're stopping, won't you? Damn near sent me arse over teakettle."

"I do beg your pardon, Karleigh. Do you know that boy in gold brocade?"

The old man followed Galing's gaze to the clump in the corner. "Puppy with the long tail?" he asked jovially. "That'd be the Lady Sophia Campion's boy—I misremember his name. Something outlandish. Theodolite?"

"Theron," Galing murmured. "Lord Theron Campion."

His body had recognized him if his mind had not, telling him with certainty that he had seen this man naked and desired him. As who would not? he thought as he threaded his way through the crowd toward his quarry. Ysaud had taken good care that anyone looking on those paintings would long to possess their subject. It would be the height of imprudence, of course, especially if Theron proved to be mixed up in the Northern affair. Lord Arlen would not approve. Still, the boy was very beautiful.

Galing stepped into Campion's line of sight and bowed. "Lord Theron Campion, is it not? I believe we met last year, at the Filisands' Daffodil Ball." It was a safe bet; everyone on the Hill attended that one. Galing saw the puzzled frown on Theron's face, but, gamely, the boy pretended to remember.

"Oh, yes. How are you?"

"As you see." Galing smiled self-deprecatingly, winning a polite smile in return. "We spoke then of University. I see you still attend."

But this time he had pushed it too far. The handsome face closed up. "That's common knowledge." Poor young thing! His every thought was reflected on his features for the world to see. Galing could see what the appeal was for Ysaud, and how she would have played with him. His manners were atrocious. Galing couldn't resist trying if he could overcome them with charm.

"Ah," he said, "but common knowledge is so…common."

This amused the boy. "It is, at least, a basis from which to start," he agreed. "Now: we have established that I study at University."

"And your subject is—?"

"Rhetoric."

Galing burst out laughing. "The elements of speech, in fact! And I've just put my foot in it."

A rueful smile. "You have, rather. Though it was a prime use of antanaclasis: the repetition of a word whose meaning changes in the iteration."

"I see. Far over my head. Now, me, I would be more likely to study something a bit less…strenuous. Geography, maybe, or history. Who would you recommend for history?"

Lord Theron frowned. "Well, Doctor Wilson isn't very strenuous. But Doctor Roger Crabbe, in Farraday, enjoys a following among the nobles."

Galing noticed with interest that Lord Theron did not think of himself as a noble. "Really?" he said lazily. "I've heard Crabbe is a bit of a bore."

"He's not especially known for his originality." Theron paused. "You might prefer Basil St Cloud, then. He's in LeClerc. Just remember, visitors must sit in the gallery so they don't bother the serious students. Alternate mornings at nine." Theron surveyed Galing up and down, from his polished shoes to the fashionable embroidery on his collar. "Too early for you, perhaps."

"Perhaps." Really, the boy was practically begging for a set-down. But Galing wouldn't give him the satisfaction. He wondered what Theron had made of that quick survey of his body. He thought of what the young nobleman was hiding under his shirt collar, and took a steadying breath. "But perhaps not. I may see you there some day?"

Theron said quickly, "Oh, I'm not a historian."

"I may see you elsewhere, then."

"At another MidWinter ball, no doubt." The clear, light voice was cool, reserved. He couldn't be bothered to flirt—not with Nicholas, anyway. It rankled, knowing what Nicholas knew of the boy's body, abandoned and louche on the paper locked in his desk. Playing the prim little scholar with all his might, this son of a notorious rake, cousin of a public scandal, heir to a title that was a byword for madness. Nicholas could not resist. "I'm surprised you don't give a ball at Riverside House," he said; "though it would be hard to surpass the parties of the last duke there."

He had scored, and handsomely. The boy's face paled with rage. "If ever," he said tautly, "I do make the attempt, I will be sure to invite you so that you can check it for accuracy. You don't look old enough to remember them, but perhaps I am mistaken."

Galing showed his teeth. "Yes. I'm afraid you are."

So there was to be no amorous pursuit, Galing thought as the boy turned and walked away. No loss; it was another sort of chase Nicholas had in mind, with higher stakes and graver consequences. If Lord Theron proved to be involved with royalists in any way, bringing him to justice would be a positive pleasure.

A little while later, Galing saw Campion again, dancing with a girl like a porcelain figurine, all soft dark hair and stiff white lace. Ysaud was small and dark, too. At least this time he'd chosen one who wouldn't bite.

THERON WAS ABLE TO DANCE ONCE AGAIN WITH Genevieve Randall. A third time would have aroused comment, and so he took many other partners, including a bouncing blonde whose dancing he enjoyed thoroughly, although her flirting alarmed him. He never knew how to respond to noble girls who flirted with him; he was always sure that he would say the wrong thing. One thing he particularly liked about Genevieve was that she didn't flirt. She answered his questions in a soft, pretty voice, and laughed when he ventured a mild joke. After handing his last partner back to her mother, Theron went in search of the Randalls again, thinking that he might talk to Genevieve and look at her, even if he

couldn't dance with her. But the Randalls, mother, daughter, and son, had gone, as well as the bouncing blonde. No longer hungry or thirsty, Theron suddenly longed for bed, the warmest bed he could find, which was in a small room on Minchin Street.

KNOWING HIS LOVER WOULD NOT COME TO HIM THAT night, Basil set himself to the long-delayed task of sorting through the papers that had migrated in unrelated piles from his bed *to* his worktable. A phrase in his own hand caught his eye: "Anselm the Wise was beyond doubt the last of the kings who was entirely sane. He was also the last of the kings whose chief wizard-advisor was trained in the North."

Was that true? What about Anselm's heir's wizard, what was his name? Ranulph? Abandoning the table, Basil rooted through old lists, diaries, letters, until, some hours later, he established to his satisfaction that Ranulph had indeed been the first Southern-born wizard to pursue his training entirely at the University. It had been part of Anselm's new rulings, he remembered, that the wizards "make themselves of Use to the Kyngdome, All its People, through our Schole of Studye, by teching their Practices and oder Wisdomes there." He was speculating happily on why Southern-trained wizards might not have turned out as powerful as their Northern-trained teachers when footsteps on the stairs outside stopped at his door. The latch lifted, and a perfumed gentleman appeared in the shadows.

"Oh. Am I disturbing you?"

"No." Basil shuffled his notes together, closed the inkwell, rubbed his cramped fingers. "No. I was just winding down. You look cold. Come in by the fire."

"There isn't any fire. You've let it go out."

"So I have, so I have." Basil peered in the wood-basket; it was empty. "Sit down and take some brandy while I fill this. Here," snagging the quilt from the bed, "wrap this around your legs. I won't be a moment. Did you know that the University as we know it could be said to have been established by Anselm's wizards?"

"I don't want to hear it just now," said Theron petulantly.

For the first time, Basil looked straight at him. "Oh, my dear," he said. The boy looked like a doll, white face and glittering eyes above an elaborate costume.

"I'm tired," he said. "Please let me lie down."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes—but never mind the fire. Just come and warm me."

Basil undressed him, save for his chain and rings, and covered them both with every blanket he possessed, as well as both his scholar's gowns and Theron's rich cloak. "There," he said when the boy stopped shivering. "Better?"

"Yes. I'm sorry; I should not have disturbed your work. But I'm cold and weary and my cheeks ache from smiling. All I want is to rest quiet and warm."

Basil said, "Why must you go out at all? Can't you just stay home and read a book sometimes? It's too much, all this running back and forth, staying out late and leaving early. Lord knows what you'll do when term begins again."

"I have to go. I can't just disappear into University, into my studies, however much I want to." Theron had never told Basil about his conversation with his annoying cousin Talbert, much less about the Duchess Katherine's latest threats. They were a side of his life he did not see any reason for Basil to have to encounter. But he tried to explain it simply. "Someday I must take my place among the nobles of this city. They have to know me. My mother put up with a great deal of nonsense from these people over my birth and my inheritance. I owe it to her, and to my family, to do the thing properly."

"You speak as though you were not one of 'them.'"

Theron gave an embarrassed shrug. "I am, by birth. Someday I shall take my seat in Council…"

"But you don't look forward to it."

"There is so much I want to study first! So much to learn!"

"But, Theron…" Basil fingered the chain around his neck. "Theron, you are no scholar."

"*What?*"

"Not a real one," Basil went on gently. "Not by temperament. You must know that."

"Not a scholar?" Theron tried to make light of it, but Basil could hear the pain in his voice. "When I've spent almost as many years here as Master Tortua?"

"Oh, yes, you've amassed a great deal of knowledge, and you are well read. But scholarship—scholarship is a discipline, Theron. It is a single-minded pursuit of a construct of reality, a dedication to discovery and analysis. Your mind is bright and quick, quicker than many. You have a great range, and a great sense of the world."

"But I'm a cuckoo's egg in the University nest," Theron finished bitterly.

"Hardly a cuckoo." Basil smiled. "A nightingale, perhaps; or a swallow. It will serve you well, this knowledge, in years to come."

Theron turned his face away, but Basil kept on. "Why can't you be proud of what you are? A great noble, from the seed of kings…"

"*Damn* your kings! Sometimes I think you take me only because Alexander Ravenhair's not available!"

"Hush." Basil gave the chain a tweak. "I am trying to tell you something important. The kings no longer rule. You nobles have taken their place, and must strive to be better than they were."

Theron sighed, burying his face in Basil's chest. "I know. I do know. But it is hard, being two people all the time. I wish I could…hire someone else to go to parties for me—to remember people's names and families, and to be charming when I don't feel like it."

"You mean a wife?"

Basil meant it ironically, but the young nobleman answered seriously, "Yes. I'll have to marry someday, for the title and the lineage and all. Already they are circling, the mamas with eligible daughters. I don't know what I will do! Marry, I suppose, and get it over with."

"The kings didn't need wives," Basil said dreamily. "They had their wizards."

"Oh, really?" Theron sounded annoyed. "How did they reproduce?"

"You've read Hollis. The wizards chose their women for them. The early kings' lives were brief and turbulent; during his reign, a young king was sent out in the autumn to give his seed to the land—in other words, I suspect, to beget as many children as he could while he reigned."

Theron murmured, "What an extraordinary amount you do know. So tell me, Basil: in the end, did the wizards corrupt the kings, or was it the

kings corrupted the wizards?"

Basil opened his mouth to explain about the South and Queen Diane and the influence of the nobles, and realized that he knew a better answer. "Neither," he said. "Both. There was no corruption as long as they loved one another."

Theron drew back. "Now, love, my dear—love is one thing I think you are *not* qualified to lecture on."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean," said Theron edgily, "it is 'not a word to pass between your father's son and mine.'"

Basil sighed, twisting Theron's chain in his fingers. "That was before."

"Before what?" Tantalizing, Theron held the chain out of his way.

"Before I—before the—it was a long time ago."

"Weeks." Theron drizzled the links of the chain onto Basil's chest.

"Weeks. I'm a quick study. I love you."

"What?"

"I love you. Mind, body, and soul, I love you. I can't help it."

Theron stretched and grinned. "Have you ever loved anyone else?"

It was not what Basil had wanted him to say. "No," he answered, rather sharply. "Never."

"Never?" Theron tweaked the chain. "Not very experienced, are you?"

"I never pretended to be. I've had other lovers, of course."

"Really? How many?"

Basil tabulated his actual conquests, added the ones he might have had if he had cared to try for them, and answered, "Eight. Or so."

"Eight. Or so. And you never told one you loved him?"

"You're different; the way I feel about you is like nothing I've ever known."

"You're serious. You really mean it." Theron crushed the chain between them in his embrace. Their two hearts thudded against it. They breathed in each other's scent. They stayed thus for some time, perfectly happy. Then Theron formally placed the chain around his lover's neck. "You are the lord of my heart," he said. "We are even now, love for love."

ALARIC FINN WAS SITTING IN A CELL IN THE CHOP, chin to knees on a straw pallet, watching the light fade slowly from the small barred window. He had been questioned twice since he'd been taken—once roughly by a stolid Guardsman, once courteously by a magnificent man with silver hair. The humiliating thing was that he had told the courteous gentleman everything he had withheld from the Guardsman. He'd been so gentle, so intelligent, so understanding, that it had seemed only reasonable, only natural, to confide in him.

Not, Finn thought miserably, that he had known very much to tell. Most Northern customs and rituals were not really secrets, after all. Everyone north of the foothills knew that the Companions of the King didn't have anything to do with politics or anything like that. It all had to do with the Land, giving the Land its due of blood and life so that it would sustain the people living on it. Any Northerner could have told the courteous gentleman about how it was necessary to feed the Land with hunting and dancing and loving. Any Northerner could have told him how the Companions who came South continued their rites in this gentler land, hoping to possess it and be possessed by it, renewing the Union begun by Alcuin so many centuries before.

Any Northerner could have. But only he, Alaric Finn, had actually done it. And he'd told him what little he knew of the Inner Mysteries as well.

Again he heard his voice, speaking almost without his will, telling the silver-haired gentleman about the Hunt, the Trial, the Deer, the Little King. These things may not be secrets in the North, his heart told him, but in the South, among the king-killers, the apostates, one did not speak of them. Still less did one speak of the men who led the rituals, who named the Hunter and loosed the Hounds. And he had named them—Roland Greenleaf, Will Smith—and watched the gentleman's secretary write it all down.

At the end of the interrogation, the gentleman had smiled slowly, gently, as a great cat might smile having caught its prey. "You've been most helpful, Master Finn. Thank you. Nonetheless, I'm afraid you must stay with us some time longer, perhaps until spring. It depends on the state of the road North. We shall not, I think, meet again."

Finn would have liked to have been released. But now, having had time to realize just what he'd done, he was glad to be in prison. It was right for

him to be punished for betraying his friends, his country. Not to mention his lover, Anthony Lindley, who had taken so naturally to the ways of the North. And what about his brothers, the Companions of the King? What would Greenleaf say when he knew?

He groaned and hid his eyes against his knees. He could never go home again, never face his father, who would have preferred death to telling a Southron the smallest, most unimportant detail of his life; never kiss his mother or embrace his brothers with a heart unshadowed by shame. All his life, he'd been taught that every man is tested, as the Little Kings were tested. A man who failed the test was less than a man, and cast out of the company of all true men. Sitting there in the dark, with the damp of the ancient stones creeping into his bones, Finn realized that he had met his trial in the person of the courteous gentleman, and had failed it utterly. He was without honor, without hope. And the weeks were long until spring.

book III

WINTER TERM

chapter I

WHERE LAST NIGHT WAS ROWDILY PUBLIC, First Night was spent with intimates in quiet preparation for the year to come. Quarrels were made up and presents were exchanged. The streets were silent and the new moon

swung unmarked among the stars. On the morning of First Day, time fell again into its accustomed cycle, and lives disrupted by the license of the White Days were put to rights again.

At LeClerc, Basil St Cloud lectured on the legal powers and responsibilities of wizards under the Treaty of Union. The students yawned and shifted on the benches. When Basil described how Alcuin had traded Northern titles for Southern forestland to be deeded to his wizards, he glanced at Finn's usual bench, expecting an outburst. Another student was in his place, industriously taking notes. Basil wondered if the boy had gone home for MidWinter. A pity, if he missed the challenge—it was just the sort of thing to thrill his romantic Northern heart. Lindley was absent, too. But this wasn't the time to consider the whereabouts of amorous students. Basil had other things to worry about.

When the bell released the students to their noon meal, St Cloud gestured for the inner circle to stay behind. In the absence of Finn and Lindley there were four of them, ranging from little Peter Godwin, who was barely fifteen, to Benedict Vandeleur, who might be twenty. He wanted to tell them exactly what he intended to do that afternoon, but Rugg had warned him against gossips. So all Basil said was, "Be outside the Nest before two, just you four, and Finn and Lindley, if you can find them. I have a thing I must do, and I would be glad of your company."

Vandeleur and Justis Blake exchanged glances, and then Vandeleur said, "Before two, you said, outside the Nest, You may count on us, sir."

Basil nodded, hesitated, decided that to add anything would be to say too much, swung his bag up on his shoulder, and marched out of LeClerc. His students stared after him in bewildered silence until Fremont said, "You may freeze your noses off here if you like. I'm going to the Nest, where I can be curious in comfort."

Flush with the quarter's stipend and MidWinter gifts, they ordered venison stew with dumplings and hot punch and also some hot potatoes for their pockets to be brought to the table just before two.

"So where is love's young dream?" Henry asked, unwinding a bright new woolen muffler from about his throat.

Vandeleur shrugged. "If you mean Finn and Lindley, last I saw them, they were making asses of themselves at the University bonfire. Way they were carrying on, they probably spent the holiday in bed."

"Surely they'd be done by now," said Peter Godwin.

Blake remembered two figures dancing half-naked and ecstatic in the heart of the wood, and said uncomfortably, "One of us should go look for them."

Henry snorted. “I wouldn’t bother. Do you really want Finn here? I don’t.”

“But Doctor St Cloud does,” Blake objected. “He said to find Finn and Lindley, and that’s what I mean to do.” He got up. “Save me a bowl of stew, Vandeleur. I shouldn’t be long.”

Looking beyond him, Peter Godwin said, “Don’t bother, Blake. Lindley’s just come in the door. Can Finn be far behind?”

It was indeed Lindley, but a very different Lindley from the love-flushed and braided dancer of Last Night. This Lindley was hollow-eyed and dressed in rags under a torn academic gown. His red hair hung lank, his narrow cheeks were bruised under reddish stubble, and he stank. The historians stared at him as though he were the ghost of murdered Hilary.

“Great god!” breathed Vandeleur at last. “Where in the Seven Hells have you been?”

Lindley frowned. “All of them, I think. Is that stew?”

“It is,” said Godwin. “I’m not sure I want to sit next to you while you eat it, though. No offense meant, but you smell like a midden.”

“There are worse things to smell like,” Blake said pleasantly. “Sit here, Lindley, and tell us about it. I was just about to go and look for you.”

Before Lindley could answer, two men appeared behind him. Their hair was bound in a dozen braids down their backs and their cheekbones were high and sharp—Northern men beyond doubt. One of them spun Lindley around, fisted a hand in his clothes, and shouted, “It was you, wasn’t it? You told them about Smith and Greenleaf. I’d like to…”

The second man shoved him aside and took his place. “Where are they, eh?” he snarled into Lindley’s stark face. “Where’s Greenleaf and Smith? And Finn? Where’s he?”

By this time, the historians had recovered themselves enough to take action. Blake and Vandeleur tackled the Northerners while Godwin took charge of Lindley, who looked ready to faint. Almost immediately, the tavern-keep bustled up, armed with his usual fistful of tankards, suggesting that the young gentlemen take their dispute outside. The Northerners departed, muttering and casting black looks behind them, and Basil’s students resumed their benches and their stew, all except Lindley, who stared at his bowl as though it contained snakes.

Blake touched him gently on his shoulder; he shrank pitifully from the touch. “You’d better tell us where you’ve been, Tony.”

“The Guard came and took us to the Chop. They put me in a cell and asked me questions about Last Night. I didn’t answer them. They let me go this

morning. That's all I know." He lifted his eyes, their dense blue luminous in his filthy face. "Don't ask me any more questions. Please."

There was a shocked silence. Then Blake took a deep breath and said, "Fair enough. Why don't you go to the baths, get some sleep. I'll stop by in the morning and see how you're getting on."

"I don't want to go home." Lindley began to shake like laundry hung in the wind. "It's dark at home. No candles."

Someone got up—Henry Fremont—fumbled in his new pouch, slapped a silver coin down on the table, muttered, "Get candles," and shoved his way to the door as if the place were on fire. Peter Godwin, looking troubled, met Fremont's contribution, and soon there was a small pile of coins in front of Lindley.

Benedict Vandeleur scooped up the coins and tied them in his handkerchief. "I'll buy the damned candles. Blake, Godwin, get him home and stay with him until I get there."

"What about two o'clock and Doctor St Cloud?" Godwin asked.

Vandeleur looked harried. "We've better than an hour yet. I'll think of something. Go!"

They asked Lindley no more questions then, but it all came out soon enough, in Lindley's narrow room, between coughs, while Blake bathed his burning face and Godwin looked helplessly on. He'd been questioned and questioned again, then left to cool his heels in a cell for days with nothing to eat save thin gruel and cold water.

"I don't even know if Alaric's dead or alive," he wailed. "They wouldn't let me see him or answer any of my questions. This morning, they told me I should be more careful of the company I kept, and let me go."

Godwin caught Blake's eye over Lindley's head, his mouth twisted with unsympathetic mirth. Blake frowned at him and said gently, "I'm sure he's alive, Tony. They'll let him go, too, as soon as they realize he's guilty of nothing but being a damn fool."

Lindley was not comforted. "But he is guilty. He betrayed them, you see—Greenleaf and Smith. He must have. I said nothing. I would rather have died than betray them. What they're doing is important: keeping up the old ways, the reverence for the land…This city, here, it's all so dead, so cold, so artificial. No one believes in the Southern gods any more, including the priests—everyone knows it's all for show. We need something real to love and honor. We need the kings."

Blake hardly knew what to respond. The man was clearly half out of his mind with fever. "I wouldn't be too quick to condemn Finn, Tony. If they tortured me, I'd tell them anything they wanted to know, just as quick as I could. Any sane man would."

Lindley gave a barking laugh that turned into violent coughing. His skin felt hot and dry under Blake's hand, and he was shivering. Blake thought uncomfortably of prison fever and how it must be close to two, and where was Vandeleur with those candles? Then the door opened and there was Vandeleur, a blanket thrown over his arm, followed by a buxom young woman in a feathered hat and a man's greatcoat, carrying a basket.

"It's almost time," he said without preamble. "I've brought candles and some food and Odette. She's promised to sit with Tony until I come back. If we run, we'll just make it. Come *on!*"

WHILE HIS STUDENTS WERE TENDING TO LINDLEY, Doctor Basil St Cloud was sitting alone in his rooms, surrounded by the books and papers, staring at the Book of the King's Wizard and finding it easy, for once, not to think about Theron. By nightfall, he would have challenged Crabbe to a duel of knowledge.

There was nothing to worry about, he told himself. In fact, it should be almost childishly easy. Roger Crabbe was an ass. His books and lectures were as full of false facts as a hive is full of bees. Crabbe wasn't interested in actual truth. He was interested only in catering to popular prejudice, of proving into infinity the viciousness of every king back to the dawn of time. Rugg was right. There was no obvious need for Basil to bring up the wizards.

Yet how could he not, when the assumption that they were monsters was what held together Crabbe's whole net of falsehoods? If the wizards had indeed been manipulative charlatans, then it followed that all the kings might well be corrupt tyrants at worst, at best gullible fools and madmen. But if the wizards were true…then the early kings, too, could be seen at last for what they truly were: dedicated rulers serving the land hand in hand with those who knew it best.

Furthermore he, Basil St Cloud, had the proof incontrovertible that they served true magic in their time. He had the Book of the King's Wizard.

But the Book, inscrutable and indecipherable, was a two-edged sword.

It lay before him, open to *A Spelle to Un-Cover Hidden Trothes*. That wouldn't help, Basil thought, even if he could read it. Irritably, he flipped to *A Workyng of*

Confusion. Below it, *For if Ye wold Turn the Tong to Fyre* caught his eye. That one, now…

Basil slapped the book shut, folded it into its wrappings, laid it in the box, closed it, and slid the whole under the bed. The greatest scholarly discovery of the age, and as useless to him as so much rotting fruit. Fury choked his breath like cold water. He slammed his fist into his papers, tearing the topmost sheets and toppling a stack of old books onto the floor. The noise brought him to himself: he picked up the books, smoothed the papers, and rubbed his smarting hand.

It wasn't as if he didn't have at least a dozen other sources that contradicted Crabbe's received "wisdom"—Karleigh's diaries and the Montague notes were the least of what he'd found. Let Crabbe say almost anything about the reigns of Alcuin's heirs, and Basil had him.

Basil got up and examined himself in the hand-sized mirror he used for shaving, knotted a clean neckcloth at his throat and tucked the ends into the bosom of his coat. No muffler—it looked sloppy. He wished he had a brooch for his hat, something ornamental—a deer's head, perhaps, or a leaf like those some of the students were wearing. He brushed the felted wool against his sleeve, set it on his head, and left the room, locking the door behind him.

HIS STUDENTS WERE WAITING FOR HIM OUTSIDE THE Nest, looking very young and solemn. Finn and Lindley were still missing. Never mind: four was enough. St Cloud took cold air deep into his lungs and said, "We're going to Farraday. I'm challenging Doctor Crabbe to a formal debate."

Henry Fremont gave a long, impressed whistle; the rest of them pricked up their ears like horses itching for a gallop. "I don't want any trouble, now," St Cloud added hastily.

"No, sir," said Vandeleur, grinning. "Of course not."

"It would create a disturbance," Godwin agreed.

"We won't lift a finger," Blake assured him. "Unless they lift one first."

"Not even then," said St Cloud, equally warmed and alarmed by his students' enthusiasm. "Doctor Rugg will be there as my witness, to see that it's all done in form. You are here because he suggested that I bring you."

What Rugg had said was, "Crabbe's the kind of man to be impressed by an entourage—just your nearest and dearest, and no one who can't keep his head." On reflection, it was just as well that Finn and Lindley weren't there. Flushed and determined, they all set off for Crabbe's hall, united in the feeling that they

were no longer just studying history, but making it. St Cloud's challenge might not shake the land or even the city, but it would certainly have an effect on how every subject was taught at University. Each one of them knew that this wasn't just Basil St Cloud against Roger Crabbe, but Research against Theory, Observation against Authority. As he pushed through the winding streets, Justis Blake was suddenly aware of the irony of an ancient historian raising the banner of a new and progressive methodology: the Past in service to the Future in opposition to the Present. It made him almost as happy as the prospect of the ruckus St Cloud's challenge was undoubtedly going to raise.

Doctor Crabbe's lecture having begun at two, the street outside Farraday was empty when St Cloud and his guard arrived, save for Doctor Leonard Rugg, his ample form wrapped in fur under his gown, looking as bright and eager as First Day morning. "The hall's pretty full," he said. "You'll have a good audience. Do you remember the formula?"

Basil, who was wishing himself back on his father's farm, closed his eyes, searched his memory for an endless moment, and said, "I challenge you, Roger Crabbe, on your facts, your reasoning, and your conclusions. The matter shall be debated between us at the Festival of Sowing, as the Governors shall witness."

"You need to say what you're challenging him on! And that last part is Crabbe's," Rugg said. "Blake, you're trustworthy. Tread on his foot or something if he looks like answering his own challenge. Get him out of there as fast as you can, and take him to—oh, the Four-Cornered Hat, and I'll meet you when I've done my part. Ready?"

St Cloud was already at the door, which, like many doors at University, was carved with oak and holly leaves entwined. Wizards once touched this latch, he thought as he put his hand to the worn bronze deer's head.

The door opened miraculously—one of his students had ducked in before him, he realized. He edged past the intent bodies of Crabbe's students, who glanced at him curiously. Crabbe was talking about the fall of the kings. His voice was clipped and slightly nasal—as ugly as the falsehoods he was feeding his students. It would be a joy, Basil thought, to blast that lying tongue with a cleansing fire.

"King Gerard put great trust in his wizards," Crabbe was saying. "That trust was his greatest, some would say his only weakness, he and his cronies being otherwise so very adept at terrorizing his subjects. Only the nobles dared to oppose his despicable practices, but Gerard instructed his wizards to keep the nobles busy, and he believed them when they told him that the plague that broke out in the Horn and Montague lands was their doing. Gerard also trusted the wizards' fabled knowledge of men's hearts to warn him of any plots or

disaffection, and he seems to have been so credulous as to have trusted in their magic to protect him from any actual attack. How shocked he must have been when the Liberator, Duke Tremontaine, walked jauntily past them all and stabbed him through the heart."

That was wrong. Basil knew it—everyone knew it, it was even in Vespas; Crabbe was just being flip and arrogant, because he thought details didn't matter. True, Gerard's wizards had been weak—but the nobles had not "walked past them." The last king's court wizards had all been carefully invited to a great feast, and then locked into the banqueting hall, its doors bound "in thrice-three locks of iron, gold, and lead," as one old ballad put it. After the death of their king, none had left that hall alive; they were burned there, with their books of magic —all except for the one Basil had in his keeping. Which did, indeed, contain notes "On the Bynding of a Renegado, with Thrice Times Three About Him." Crabbe was being flippant, of course, but his prating was intolerable, and Basil raised up his voice in the hall to say so:

"I challenge you, Roger Crabbe, Doctor of this University, on your facts, your reasoning, and your conclusions." The words poured strong and clear over his tongue. "The wizards were true wizards, and their power was true magic."

Gasps and shouts, silenced by Crabbe's lifted hand. He scanned the hall, his eyes narrowed, his tight mouth lipless with rage.

Leonard Rugg's rich tones rolled out across the room. "Should you care to accept the challenge, Doctor Crabbe, you must say, 'The matter of the wizards shall be debated between us at the Festival of Sowing, as the Governors shall witness.' Then you appoint a second, and he and I will present the whole thing formally to the Governors. My advice," he went on in a more confidential tone, "is to say it and get it over with before there's a riot."

Belatedly, St Cloud realized that the hall was buzzing like a hive of wasps working themselves up to an attack. The pulse thudded in his throat.

"Very well," said Crabbe, his voice tight with rage. "The matter of the wizards shall be debated between us, at the Festival of Sowing. And the University Governors will judge between us, who is the traitor and who the true scholar." He turned to Rugg with furious courtesy. "Will that do, Doctor Rugg?"

Rugg glared at the little history Doctor. "I'm willing to stretch a point," he answered, "for the sake of expedience. And your second?"

"You must excuse me, Doctor Rugg, if I hesitate to embroil any of my colleagues in this nonsense without warning or permission. I will furnish you with a name tomorrow, or perhaps the next day."

Justis Blake's voice rumbled in Basil's ear. "It's time to go."

Basil nodded absently, his whole mind concentrated on the compact, truculent figure of his rival. He was as single-minded as a terrier after rats. He'd be a vicious fighter, too, full of tricks and dodges.

Blake's large hand gripped his arm and tugged at it urgently. "Come, Doctor St Cloud! Please!"

Reluctantly, St Cloud allowed Blake and Vandeleur to guide him through a gauntlet of jeers and shoves. The other students went before and behind, protecting him from the worst of it, shoving back a bit, but on the whole, behaving themselves. When they reached the street, St Cloud wanted to wait for Rugg, but the students, more shaken than they would admit, hustled him directly to the Four-Cornered Hat. It wasn't familiar territory, but it was where Doctor Rugg had said to go, so in they went, and found an empty table, and sat down and called for ale for themselves and brandy for Doctor St Cloud and Doctor Rugg.

Silence fell, awkward and unaccustomed among such a garrulous lot. St Cloud glanced from face to shocked face. "I would have warned you," he said frankly, "had I known. But it was the inspiration of the moment. Like Sebastian Fire-Blood, I seized my enemy's weapon by the blade and turned it against him."

Henry Fremont snorted. "That's bitter comfort, seeing as Sebastian Fire-Blood lost his hand."

"He won the battle," said St Cloud. "That was what signified. And that's what signifies here."

Justis exchanged a look with Benedict Vandeleur, who shrugged—he wasn't about to make a fool of himself stating the obvious. But Justis didn't believe, seeing St Cloud's dazed and exalted face, that the young magister had any real notion of what he'd just done or what it meant in the real world. Scholars weren't much given to practical concerns, after all. So he wet his throat with a gulp of ale and said, "A battle isn't an academic debate, sir, nor the other way around. Academic debates draw no blood. On the other hand, there's a law against talking about magic. People will take notice. And spring is a long way away."

"I mean them to take notice," St Cloud said stoutly. "The truth about the wizards and their magic must emerge eventually. Truth can't be stifled forever. It's better brought out in an academic debate than in some more violent manner."

Peter Godwin raised anxious hazel eyes from his tankard. "Do you really think so, sir? Won't it upset things?"

"Of course it will upset things," said Rugg from behind him. "Bastard. Little tick."

"I beg your pardon," said Basil stiffly.

Rugg sat down in front of the brandy and took a gulp. "Crabbe," he explained. "I was a whisker from challenging him myself. 'Will that do, *Doctor* Rugg?' And you should have heard what he said once you left. Tick."

Henry Fremont snorted and then yelped as Vandeleur's boot connected with his shin. St Cloud smiled. "You've hit on it exactly, Rugg. Crabbe is a tick, sucking ideas from other men and claiming them for his own. I must be careful not to ignore his head, lest it fester in the wound."

"And just what do you think you mean by that figure?" inquired Rugg testily. "You're a wonder, St Cloud. Do you realize that you've just committed yourself to proving a fact the nobles have been moving the earth to disprove these two hundred years? And I'm your second. We're both likely to be clapped into the Chop for treason. Or laughed out of University, which would be worse. I thought I had your word you wouldn't do this."

Basil looked the irascible metaphysician in the eye. "You had my word I'd try. I'm sorry, Leonard. He left me no choice. I know what I'm doing."

Doctor Rugg threw up his hands in despair and applied himself to his brandy. The door of the tavern opened to admit a group of students and their teacher. St Cloud caught a glimpse of a red ribbon-bow in one student's long, fair hair. *Girlish*, he thought disapprovingly, then realized that the student *was* a girl, that they were all girls—no, not so young as most of his students. Women.

The magister turned, searching for an empty table, affording Basil a clear view of a hawk-nosed, olive-skinned face and a mass of dark hair braided into a heavy crown.

"Doctor Sophia Campion," said Doctor Rugg, amused. "Would you like an introduction?"

"No," Basil snapped. "I would not. What's *she* doing here?"

A buxom woman with brassy hair was leading the female physicians to a table that had been occupied a moment before by a group of young men. "Fraternizing," said Rugg. "Just as we do at the Nest. I told you she was odd." He glanced around at St Cloud's students, who were gaping as though they'd never in their lives seen a woman before. "Those are not women," he told them. "Those are surgeons. They'd sooner cut you up than kiss you. And there's not one of them a day under twenty-five."

"I knew that," said Vandeleur unexpectedly. "When the Governors let women attend lectures, they stipulated they had to be of legal age." Everyone stared at him. He shrugged. "My sister wants to be a mathematician. She's sixteen."

Ignoring this byplay, Basil studied Theron's mother, trying to find his lover in her vividly foreign face. She was explaining something to one of her students, shaping the air with her hands, touching the woman's arm, tapping a finger against the table, never still until the woman spoke, when she leaned forward to listen, all attention. *Like Theron*, Basil thought, and was suddenly overcome with restless desire. He drained his brandy and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Rugg asked. "We have a lot to talk about. Strategy. Plans. Meetings with the Governors. You've put a match to dry tinder, Basil. You must help contain the fire."

"Later, Leonard." It came out more brusquely than he'd meant, but that was better than pleading. "Come to my rooms tomorrow afternoon—we'll plan then, as much as you like." He looked with affection at the concerned faces of the students who had witnessed his challenge. "You have my gratitude, all of you. No finer scholars and friends could exist the length and breadth of University."

He turned to leave.

Sophia Campion, chancing just then to catch his eye, was astonished to see a handsome young Doctor of Humane Studies turn scarlet and give her a sheepish smile before fairly fleeing the room. Then one of her students claimed her attention, and she forgot all about him.

chapter II

HENRY FREMONT'S NOTE INFORMING GALING about the challenge was short and not particularly informative: *Doctor St Cloud has challenged Doctor Crabbe to a debate about the wizards.*

Galing looked at the back of the paper, but there was nothing more. It was not like Fremont to let a chance escape to expand Galing's knowledge. His

reports were commonly as full of ancient history as modern news (*context*, Henry said), and ran to several closely written pages. Whatever else Galing might learn in the course of this investigation, he was learning a great deal about history. But not today. What about the wizards was St Cloud intending to debate? Why had Henry suddenly grown so coy? He laid the letter on the thick stack of Henry's reports and buried his shapely hands in his curls.

This favor Arlen had asked of him, this matter of tracing and diagnosing a troublesome rumor, was more complex, more obscure than Nicholas could have imagined. No sooner did he root out one stem of it than two others would spring up to claim his attention. First, there were the Northerners, the Companions of the King. Troublemakers, malcontents, full of superstitious customs and beliefs. Now that their ringleaders were safely stored in the Chop for easy reference, that should be the end of it. But it wasn't the end, not by a long shot. The world of the Companions was beginning to creep into the drawing rooms of the Hill. While their wives danced, the older nobles discussed in shocked whispers how the Duke of Hartsholt's "revolting peasants," as Condell insisted on calling them, had burned Hartsholt's steward in effigy up north in their MidWinter bonfire. Even Lord Hemmynge, who was more interested in horses than politics, knew that the women of Harden had made a show of stuffing their mattresses with valuable goat hair, rather than spin it for sale on their lord's estates; they called it "Alcuin's Bed," and said they slept easier on it than the old king had. The past was rising; people were talking, and even nobles with no Northern holdings were beginning to say that something must be done.

Under the circumstances, it made Nicholas uneasy that a young Doctor of History was proposing to trot out theories about wizards in a public forum. It made him even more uneasy that the heir to Tremontaine was so consistently attracted to lovers who delved into the past.

But when he imagined explaining his unease to Arlen, he could all too easily imagine Arlen's response: "Historians talk about wizards. Painters love exotic subjects. Young men are romantics. Where is your proof?"

Right now, all Galing had to go on was Greenleaf and Smith in the Chop, Ysaud in her studio, and Doctor Basil St Cloud in his lecture-hall, all babbling, in their several ways, about wizards and deer and mystic sacrifices. And the subject of the Northern boys' hunt, of Ysaud's paintings and St Cloud's passion, was Theron Campion, heir to Tremontaine.

If Galing could only show some connection between Campion and the North!

He pulled out the transcript of the prisoner Greenleaf's interrogations and leafed through the pages. His eye caught on a phrase, repeated several times over

several days:

The kings must come again. The land withers and dies without their blood; the people weaken without their seed.

Galing dropped the transcript with a sound of disgust. Green-leaf was clearly mad. Magic kings and wizards were the stuff of old wives' tales, not of political uprisings. To become king, Campion would need allies behind him, followers, an army. There was no sign, in University or anywhere else, of anything so tangible.

Still, he thought, the key to his proof must lie somewhere in the great mass of historical information with which Henry had burdened him. It was significant that Theron was descended from the sister of Gerard the Last King. True, the nobles had signed a document relinquishing any claim to the throne by right of blood for themselves and their descendants. But a signature is merely ink, as an oath is merely breath to a man with sufficient motive to break it. It was not difficult to imagine Theron Campion breaking his ancestor's word to set himself upon the very throne his ancestor had broken.

If there was anything going on—and Galing could not swear absolutely that there was—Campion must be at the center of it. There was nothing for it, then, but for Galing to scrape a closer acquaintance with the fellow and see if he could discover what he was up to. It was a pity about that exchange he had allowed himself at the Montague ball, but he could always apologize, if Campion even remembered it.

Rising from his desk, Galing went to the case that held his collection of curious books. He unlocked the delicate iron grille, opened it, abstracted a leather case, and pulled out Ysaud's sketches. Theron Campion's narrow face looked up at him out of a fretwork of leaves that shadowed but did not hide his eager body. Horns branched from his temples. Ysaud had scribbled a title across the corner: "The Summer King."

Arrogant bastard, Nicholas thought, and returned the sketch to the folder.

THERON CAMPION WAS ATTENDING A BIRTHDAY PARTY when he learned of Basil's challenge, and he was not pleased.

It was the birthday of Lady Genevieve Randall, the girl he'd admired at the Montague ball. Now that term had begun again and he felt he had proven to Katherine that he had no more New Year's madness up his sleeve, Theron was much less inclined to go to parties on the Hill. But the invitation had been delivered personally by the Randall son, Clarence; Theron had a vague feeling that having made a fool of himself in Clarence's company in a whorehouse at the

Harvest Feast gave the Randalls some rights to him now. And besides, the sister was very pretty. So he allowed his valet to pour him into something tight and stylish with dozens of tiny buttons, and went to celebrate with the Randalls.

Sebastian Hemmynge and Peter Godwin were there, too, along with the usual marriageable girls and eligible young men. Theron realized he hadn't seen his erstwhile companions since the night of the Deer Hunt. He wondered if they, too, had been scolded and kept home. Had they even been there in the grove? He really did not know. When he tried to picture that night, the images made him queasy. He had no desire to ask what the other men remembered.

The party took the form of a rustic feast, with the servants all dressed as country folk from the Randalls' estates, serving bread and cheese and cider and preserves from their home. Supervised by mothers and married sisters, Lady Genevieve and her guests danced and even played at forfeits and blindman's buff. Theron had to redeem his forfeit by kissing "the prettiest girl in the room," and politeness dictated that he choose his hostess. With everyone watching, he tilted up the chin of the blushing girl, and brushed the lightest of kisses across her lips. Her hand trembled on his sleeve. He looked into her eyes, and felt his rod stiffen like a schoolboy's. "My token," he cried breathlessly, to cover his throbbing pulse. "You've got to give it back now. Unless you want another kiss!"

Everyone went "Ooh!" and Lady Genevieve fumbled to release from her wrist the ribbon from his shoe that he'd thrown into the forfeit ring.

"Isn't she going to have to lace it back on for you?" a bold girl cried. (After the party, her mother slapped her for it.)

But Theron was just as glad to be able to bend down and lace his shoe himself.

The dances were country dances. Genevieve's eyes sparkled and her pale cheeks were flushed, and tendrils of dark hair escaped from her chignon in the most alluring fashion, clinging to her sweating neck. Theron partnered the girl twice, but swung her about and touched her hand countless times as the lines of dancers met and parted. When they played at blindman's buff he tried to track her by her laugh, but found instead that he had his arms around the waist of the bold girl, who made a great fuss refusing to be kissed, and so he made her sing a song, instead.

He was heading to the punch bowl to get a glass for her when he overheard the words "St Cloud," and stopped in his tracks. Peter Godwin was gesticulating with great animation to his friend Hemmynge. Theron forgot all about the girl.

"It was magnificent!" Godwin was saying. "He stood up right in front of the entire room and said the wizards were real! You should have seen their faces! If

we hadn't been there, who knows what they might have done to him, right on the spot."

Theron moved closer. Peter saw him and froze. Godwin had not been one of the bearers of chicken last fall, but he'd certainly heard all about it. "Oh," young Godwin said stiffly. "Hullo, Campion. Lord Theron, I mean. I was just telling Seb about the challenge."

"Wonderful stuff," Hemmynge raved. "I might have to switch to history! Nothing this interesting ever happens in geography! Can you get me a good seat for the debate, Theron?"

"I really have no idea," he said stiffly, and turned away.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU DIDN'T TELL ME." THERON HAD looked for Basil at the Blackbird's Nest, but found him hunched over his books on Minchin Street in an atmosphere of dust and ink and musty paper. "You challenge Roger Crabbe to an academic duel, it's the talk of the taverns, and I find out from bloody Sebastian Hemmynge! Who found out from baby Godwin, and only because they both happened to be at the same birthday party."

"Well, you know now," Basil said mildly.

Theron stormed on. "I am not accustomed to getting my University gossip at third-hand on the Hill, Basil. You are much to blame."

"Because I do not supply you with gossip, my lord?"

Theron stopped as if he had been slapped. "That was not called for."

Basil saw with surprise that Theron's face had gone quite pale. Stubble stood out dark on the young man's cheeks, and his eyes were big with hurt. Wearily, Basil pushed his chair back from his worktable. "I am sorry. It just never occurred to me—I don't think of University politics when I'm with you."

Theron sat on the edge of the bed. "Because you love me. You love me so much you don't bother to tell me anything important. Wonderful."

"You always object when I try to tell you about history."

"This isn't history, this is *real*." He caught himself. "I don't mean history isn't real, but—don't you see there's a huge difference between telling me about dead kings and wizards, and telling me something you have decided you will do?"

"They are both real to me," Basil said quietly.

"I know. I know they are." Theron came and put his hands on Basil's shoulders, and nuzzled his hair—a peace offering. "What are you studying? It looks like a laundry list."

"It's clothing, actually. The paper was used as the lining for a cookery book, but I think it's an inventory of clothing for the royal compound, and I'm hoping —wondering, really, if it might not be—well, something about wizards."

"Wizards? In a cookery book?" Theron kissed the top of his head. "Basil, you are wonderful. I'll leave you to it, then."

He paused a moment, and Basil said, "No, don't go. It's not important, just interesting. Look: 'Ten robes of brown wool, with cloaks of fur, according to their natures.' And this: 'Bear Dress—Master WG.' That *could* mean Master Wizard G…Don't go, Theron."

"I have to go," Theron said mournfully.

"Why?"

"Because I'll never get all these buttons undone and done up again!"

Basil said huskily, "I'll do that. Lie down, my love, and I'll do it all."

WHEN THERON RETURNED TO RIVERSIDE THE NEXT day, Lady Sophia showed him an envelope. "Who are these Randall people?" she asked him. "The Lady Randall invites us to a musical evening together to their house. You know I detest musical evenings. Are these people I know, Theron? Must I go?"

Her son bit into an apple. "I don't think you know them; they're newly come to town, to marry off the daughter, probably. There's a son my age, who's in the Perry crowd. I don't see why you can't decline."

"Ah. Is it the daughter who plays the viol? The Lady Genevieve, it says?"

Theron looked over her shoulder. "Why, yes." He imagined Genevieve with a viol tucked between her knees. "I'll tell you what; I'll go, and give your regrets in person. I'll tell them you had to perform a sudden triple amputation, or lance a large boil."

Sophia laughed. "Come here, my darling, your buttons are crooked."

chapter III

NICHOLAS GALING WAS FEELING DISCOURAGED and frustrated. Henry Fremont hadn't sent him word in days and Theron Campion was proving annoyingly elusive. He was never with the other young nobles of his age group, and Nicholas had no mind to go chasing him at University. Galing was full of suspicions and instincts and empty of hard facts and tired to death of the whole subject of wizards and kings. So he took himself, as he sometimes did, to a public bathhouse. There was nothing like a good sweat to clear the mind.

He was lying in the steam room on a scratchy piece of toweling, sweaty, sodden, and blissfully empty-minded, when two young men came in and established themselves on the marble benches. Their voices boomed and rattled off the tiles, the words running together almost incomprehensibly. Nicholas caught a word—"magic"—then a name—"St Cloud"—then a laugh. He came to attention, and was rewarded by a whole sentence: "I'll give him this: he has balls, does Doctor St Cloud, to unseal that wasp's nest after so many years."

"He's right, of course," said the second man. "He must be. There'd be no point forbidding all mention of magic if it wasn't a real threat. I wonder how he'll prove it?"

"Make lightning flash out of a blue sky?" the first man suggested. "Grow corn on the Great Hall steps?"

"Make all the Governors' robes disappear—that's what I'd do."

"That's because you haven't the imagination of a ten-copper nail," the first man said, disgusted, and the conversation degenerated into bickering.

Assuming that his informants thought themselves alone, Nicholas lay still until they'd sweated their fill. Feeling weak and wobbly from the heat, he ignored the blandishments of the bath-boys and the massage-men, and had a cold plunge before drying himself and scrambling into his clothes. It was late—nearly midnight—when he emerged, clean, neat, and blazingly furious at the world in general and Henry Fremont in particular. Still, he needed information more than he needed to wring young Master Fremont's scraggy neck. So he procured a chaise and directed it to take him to Edward Tielman's house on Fulsom Street.

Late as it was, Felicity herself received him in the library. He was startled to see her heavily pregnant—he hadn't thought it so long since their last meeting. Her belly was like a cauldron among the folds of her gown, but her face was thin and there were dark circles under her eyes.

"Ned's very occupied," she told Galing after the first pleasantries were over. "He's seldom home before midnight and leaves first thing in the morning. I'm thinking of having his portrait painted so the baby will know what its father looks like, except he'd never find time to sit for it."

Galing accorded this sally a sympathetic smile. "I'll look for him at the Council Hall, then, if you'll excuse me. It's rather urgent I speak to him."

"Of course," said Felicity, rather sadly. "But do come by again for a late supper or something. Ned and I miss you, and I, for one, am not getting about much these days."

Nicholas bowed and murmured politely and was on his way out the door when voices in the hall heralded Edward's timely return from the Council Hall. Felicity heaved herself out of her chair. "I'll tell him you're here and send him straight in. Don't keep him up too late, will you, Nick?"

The minutes ticked by, and Nicholas waited for Edward with mounting impatience. He imagined Felicity reproaching her husband for coming home so late and extracting a promise to get rid of his untimely visitor as soon as possible. It was odd, how child-bearing could metamorphose a perfectly nice, tolerant woman into a domestic tyrant. Nicholas knew a moment of gratitude that he was not an eldest son, to shackle himself to a woman for the sake of the family.

The hands of the library clock approached one. Nicholas was reaching for the bell to summon someone to remind Tielman of his existence when his friend himself entered. He was wearing a dressing-gown over breeches and shirt. "I'm sorry, Nick; Felicity said you were in a hurry, but I insisted on seeing her to bed before I came up. She's more delicate than she'll let on, you know, and I worry." He unstoppered a decanter, poured two glasses of red wine, and held one out to Nicholas. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Nicholas ignored the glass. "Did you know that Basil St Cloud has declared that he will prove that the wizards had true magic? In public forum?"

"Why, yes. I did. Didn't you? What happened to Henry?"

"Henry is obviously more loyal to St Cloud and his bizarre notions than you thought," Nicholas snapped. "What I want to know is why this Doctor St Cloud isn't in the Chop, debating the reality of magic with Lord Arlen and his inquisitors."

Edward smiled. “Is that all? I thought you’d figured it out, or I would have written you a report myself. As it is—look, I’m not going to stand here like an idiot with two glasses of wine while you glare at me. Take this and sit down and I’ll tell you everything.”

Nicholas was very close to knocking the glass from Edward’s hand and cursing him for a swollen-headed, jumped-up servant who didn’t know his place. But a good intelligencer must govern his temper, so Nicholas took the wine and sat as he’d been told, and sipped before cocking his eyebrow at his friend. “Well, Ned?”

Tielman propped his elbows on his knees and twirled the wine in his glass. “Well. The Governors came to us as soon as they heard about the challenge, wanting to know what they ought to do about it. They were in a right old state, like maiden aunts exclaiming over a housemaid who’s fallen pregnant. Should they dismiss St Cloud out of hand, should they refuse to hear the debate, they hadn’t known anything about any of this, the University held itself above such matters, and could we please make it all go away.”

“And you said?”

“Lord Horn said he would put it before the Inner Council, and let them know.”

“And the Inner Council said?”

“Well.” Tielman sat back and took a thoughtful sip of wine. “It wasn’t quite the whole Inner Council—Lord Horn saw no reason for the Dragon Chancellor or the ducal houses to be bothered over so trifling a matter.”

Galing gripped the arms of his chair. “Trifling?” he inquired as mildly as he could. “The Council of Lords didn’t think so when they declared any mention of the wizards and magic to be unlawful. And it still is, as far as I know.”

“Yes, yes, I know; which is why the Governors are in such a flap. But Lord Arlen made the point, and Lord Horn agrees, that subjects no one is allowed to discuss under threat of imprisonment are more likely to attract the wrong kind of attention than subjects anyone can talk about with impunity. You can’t have secret societies when you don’t have a secret for them to rally around. We’re indebted to St Cloud, really, for bringing it all out into the open.”

“Ah.” Nicholas sat back with an assumption of ease. He was blindingly angry, and aware that his anger might impair his judgment. “Lord Arlen said that, did he?”

“‘Let the man do his best to prove it was real,’ he said. ‘I don’t imagine he can do it, but if he can, I don’t imagine it will mean much outside the University. Magic has nothing to do with the way things are run today; why shouldn’t scholars talk about it?’”

"And those were his very words?" Nicholas couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"Close enough."

"I take it you were there, then. At this little convocation of the cream of the Inner Council. And that despite the extreme erudition of the distinguished councilors assembled, no one thought to point out that it's not only about wizards and magic and ancient history. Such a debate calls the Council's own legitimacy to challenge."

"How so?"

"Because the overthrow of the monarchy is the foundation of the Council's authority!" Without knowing he was doing it, Nicholas drained half his wineglass. "Of *our* authority. Of the nobles' right to rule. Because, you blockhead, if the wizards were really tied to the land with real magic, and chose the kings to rule, then the nobles had no right to depose them!"

Tielman looked at him with affection, long and hard. "What a lot of knowledge Henry's managed to cram into your head after all. Far better than old Bracegirdle and our other tutor." He waved his hand. "You are right, I'm sure. But whoever was in the right of it two hundred years ago, it's a done deal now. And no amount of scholarly debate, however well-reasoned, can change that."

Nicholas struggled with his temper and subdued it enough to say, "I presume my investigation is closed, then."

"Has Arlen told you it is?" Edward inquired.

This was too much. "You know he hasn't. He hasn't told me anything. You're his leaf-crowned boy—you tell me."

"Oh, lord," said Edward. "You're really hurt, aren't you? Don't deny it—I knew you when your father gave your brother that horse."

"Edward." Galing's voice was tight and even. "I'm not a boy. And this isn't a matter of petty jealousy. I understood that I'd been given a job to do, a job that had some importance to the welfare of the city, perhaps of the country. To discover that it was so inconsequential that no one would even bother to call me off…Well, it came as a shock. I wouldn't have thought it of Arlen."

"No," Tielman agreed. "You wouldn't, would you?"

The fire popped and settled in the grate; Tielman stirred it with a poker and threw on another log. Galing thought a moment and said, "He's playing some damned endgame, isn't he? It's another of his plague-rotted tests. All I have to do is figure out whether he's really not paying attention to St Cloud's challenge, or only officially not paying attention."

"Sounds a bit complicated to me," Tielman said.

"The Serpent's a complicated man."

"He is that."

They sat for a moment, contemplating the fire and Lord Arlen's complexity. Then Nicholas said, "Look. Do you want me to keep pursuing this or not?"

"This?"

Edward sounded as if he might have begun to nod off over the fire. Now that Nicholas came to look at him, he saw that his friend's eyes were almost as shadowed as his wife's. "The possibility of a monarchist plot in the city," he explained.

Edward yawned and shrugged. "Truth? I don't know. This is Arlen's game, and Arlen plays his cards close to his chest. If he hasn't called you off, it's my guess you're still on."

This was Galing's guess, too, but it was comforting to have his friend's confirmation. It was so comforting that Nicholas turned down Edward's half-hearted offer of more wine and left the poor man to his bed and whatever joy he might get of his pregnant wife and went home. There he spent the rest of the night composing a careful letter to Lord Arlen, hinting that he had something to report concerning a highly placed member of the nobility, and would like to wait upon his lordship at his lordship's earliest convenience. It was time to flush the Serpent from his lair.

THE TIME FOLLOWING MIDWINTER IS THE DREARIEST of the year. Days are short, nights are long, and both are cold and wet with no immediate prospect of relief. Winter's Tail is what the old wives call it, dragging filth at winter's ass. It is a good time to sit by a roaring fire in company or with work at hand. It was a bad time to be poor and alone.

Which was why Justis Blake took it on himself to shame the softer-hearted members of the St Cloud coterie into calling upon Anthony Lindley with food and fuel and good cheer until he was able to fend for himself. His ten days in the Chop had left him very ill indeed, ill enough to need a physician to bleed him and prescribe no fewer than two noxious and expensive medicines. Henry Fremont, whose father must have had a very good year indeed, bore the greatest part of the expense, and furthermore gave up his new muffler to the sufferer. Since he and Lindley had hardly been close friends, he came in for a certain amount of teasing, particularly from Vandeleur, who pretended to scent a helpless love in Fremont's generosity. Fremont finally lost his temper and gained a black

eye trying to box the notion out of Vandeleur's head. Which didn't, as Godwin pointed out, really prove anything one way or the other.

It was two weeks after the challenge, and Justis Blake's turn to play nursemaid. When he came into the Nest, Benedict Vandeleur greeted him with, "How's our little king-maker today?" and shoved down the bench to give his friend room to sit.

"Is that turnip stew? Can I have some?" Without waiting for an answer, Blake picked up Vandeleur's spoon and dug in, accepting with a nod the hunk of bread Vandeleur handed him across the table.

"You'd think the Chop would have given him a distaste for all that Northern flap," Godwin remarked.

"Or at least taught him the sense of keeping quiet about it," Vandeleur added.

Blake tried to say something around a mouthful of stew and bread, choked, coughed, and was thumped upon the back until he protested he was fine.

"Good," said Henry Fremont. "But if you were going to tell us that you can't expect a man half out of his mind with fever to display sense or discretion, you'll wish you had choked."

Blake grinned across at his irritating friend. "Shut up, Henry. I wasn't going to say anything of the kind. He's better today. He said he needn't trouble us any more, that he can take care of himself now. He's grateful but embarrassed, is what I think."

"Fair enough," said Vandeleur. "I can't say I'm sorry. I like Lindley, but it's damnably inconvenient. Odette complains."

"Oh, does she now?" Henry sneered. "Is that because you make her visit him in your place?"

Vandeleur ignored him. "Lindley's changed. I can't quite put my finger on it, but he's not as soft as he was."

"He's got new friends, too," Godwin put in. "I met them on the steps last time I went to see him. A couple of weedy Northerners, looking like they'd been eating gooseberries—you know what they're like. After that scene in the Nest, I couldn't imagine what they'd been doing there, but Lindley seemed cheerful enough. He'd better watch himself, though, consorting with Northerners. It doesn't look good."

"Maybe they had news of Finn," Blake said. "Anyone heard anything?"

No one had. The general opinion was that he was still in the Chop, and what were things coming to, when a man couldn't raise a little riot and rumpus on Last Night without the Council getting in a twist over it? "He has only himself to

blame, spouting off about kings and deer all over the place," Godwin said, a noble to the bone.

"Perhaps we should go and tell someone he didn't mean anything by it," said Blake.

"Should we?" asked Vandeleur. "I expect he's told them that and they don't believe it. We'll only make things worse."

A few days later, Lindley duly returned to Basil St Cloud's lectures, looking pale and painfully thin. When St Cloud tried to speak to him, he turned away the magister's sympathy.

"It was the making of me," he told St Cloud earnestly. "I had nothing to do for ten days but think about it, and I realized for the first time how important it is that everyone know the truth about the kings and the wizards. Truth is the greatest thing, greater than love or friendship. Love betrays you; so do friends. Truth is the only thing that never changes. Truth and the Land. That is why your debate is so important. Doctor Crabbe is the enemy of truth. He must be vanquished."

He was very serious, as only a young zealot can be serious, and Basil was touched. "I intend to do my best, Lindley."

The young man's eyes glittered eagerly. "Will you let me serve you, magister? I'll search the Archives, take notes, carry your water and fetch your wood, if that would ease your labors. It is not right that you should work unattended."

"Thank you, Lindley," Basil said briskly. "I was just about to bring that up." He raised his voice. "Blake, Vandeleur, Fremont, Godwin. Don't leave. I need you."

When his students had gathered, he said, "You may think spring's a long way off, but you're wrong. There's hardly time for me to find the material on the wizards I'll need to convince the Governors that I'm not a dangerous lunatic. I'll need your help. I'll need you to go into the University Archives."

The students exchanged stupefied looks. "But, sir," Vandeleur objected, "there's nothing to find about magic in the Archives. They burned all the wizards' books. It says so—not only in the usual texts; it's even in the ballads and the poems."

"Ballads and poems tend to take the most dramatic view of things. *They* were nobles, Vandeleur, not academics. They only burned everything they found," St Cloud said. "They could not have found everything."

Justis Blake's heart had begun pounding as though he'd been running. This was scholarship with a vengeance, scholarship with teeth. This was the most important thing that had ever happened to him. "What are we to look for, sir?" he asked.

"Anything that might conceivably have to do with wizards. Look through lists, letters, books. Look for wizard-like names in the University Rolls and references to unusual weather or plagues or good harvests. I know there was a School of Arts Magical at University once: see if you can find out what the subjects of the lectures were. Universities hate to get rid of documents. There's bound to be something."

He studied their faces. Lindley was glowing. Fremont and Vandeleur seemed stunned—no doubt by the amount of work involved. Blake looked almost as happy as Lindley at the prospect of hours in the Archives, sifting through dusty papers. But young Peter Godwin looked deeply distressed. Basil, who had temporarily forgotten the boy was a noble, said, "Never mind, Godwin. I shouldn't have asked you. You're too young for divided allegiances. It's enough that you remain my student."

Godwin's voice was tight. "If I'm to remain your student, sir, then I must work with the others."

"Thank you, Godwin. But I'd be a poor magister, to set you against your family's interests."

The boy looked at him sternly, and in his set face Basil saw the man he would become. "I'm not a child, sir, and I'm not a…a reactionary. I want you to win. Not just for our own honor, or yours, but for truth. My family will understand."

Basil pressed his shoulder. "Let's hope so. The rest of you, do you agree to help me?"

"We do," they said gravely, feeling the solemnity of the moment and the undertaking. Then they grinned, and he slapped their shoulders and told them he'd meet them tomorrow, with their letters of introduction to the Master Librarian. And then they left, all except Lindley.

The redhead unpinned the brooch on his hatband and thrust it into his magister's hand. "Take this, for luck. And remember that in your service, the service of truth, I would dare anything." Then he darted off after the others, leaving Basil holding a carved oak leaf.

When Lord Arlen came to call at Tremontaine House, the duchess was sparring with her arms-master in the Long Gallery. The butler announced the Serpent Chancellor in a stentorian voice that might have been a mouse-squeak for all the attention Lady Katherine paid it. She continued to dance the arms-master across the hall, forcing him back with a series of neat, quick thrusts. His foot struck one of the chairs pushed against the wall and he went on the

offensive. Katherine began to give way; there was a little flurry of action, too fast to follow, and the arms-master's sword spun into the air and fell clattering to the parquet.

"I wish you'd teach me that disarm, m'lady," said the swordsman, rubbing his stinging hand.

Katherine retrieved his sword and offered it to him, hilt-first. "If I taught you that disarm, Morris, I'd never have a chance of beating you, and well you know it. Thank you. It was a good bout."

Morris bowed and disappeared. Katherine picked up a loose scarlet gown, wrapped it around her shoulders, and turned to the two figures standing at the gallery's far end. "I'm not fit for company," she called to them. "Will you wait in the study while I change, Lord Arlen? It won't take long."

Arlen smiled. "No need to change on my account, dear lady. I do not intend to detain you for long."

"I see." Katherine came down the room and handed her sword to the butler. "See to this, if you please, and tell Molly to prepare a bath. I'll ring if we need anything."

They walked companionably through the beautifully appointed halls of Tremontaine House toward Katharine's study, as odd a pair as might be met anywhere on the Hill. Lord Arlen was tall and well made, his black coat tight across his shoulders, his hair burnished silver, his nose uncompromising, his face seamed like a mountainside. Beside him, the Duchess Tremontaine trotted like a stocky boy, her graying hair escaping from a tarnished buckle, her round cheeks patchily flushed with exercise.

"A handsome apartment," Arlen observed as she shut the door behind them.

Katherine snorted impatiently. "You did not sally forth from your private fortress to talk about my study," she said. "This is about Theron, isn't it?" Lord Arlen raised his brows meaningfully in the direction of the chairs flanking the fire. "Oh, sit down and stop playing off that air of mystery," she said irritably. "The boy means no harm. He's a young fool, and his mother spoils him."

Arlen sat and stretched his long legs to the fire. "Dear Katherine. I can always count on you to cut straight to the heart of the matter. I agree that Lord Theron is a fool. I only seek enlightenment about what sort of fool he is."

"Fair enough." Katherine took the other chair, drawing her gown closer around her. "He's given to enthusiasms," she said thoughtfully. "Mostly over people, some of them highly unsuitable."

"Politically?" Lord Arlen sounded bored, but Katherine knew the question was far from idle. They were old sparring partners, she and Arlen, battling

amiably over the course of the city's development while Crescents came and went. Arlen distrusted change; Katherine welcomed it. Both loved the city and the country that sustained it.

Katherine mentally reviewed what she knew of Theron's friendships. "No," she said. "Not really. Not on purpose, anyway. I think politics bore him."

"Do they?"

"He always makes an excuse to leave the table when Marcus and I get going, and he's made it clear he'd rather do almost anything than sit in Council."

"A pity," said Arlen, "given the position he'll hold someday. But not, perhaps, surprising."

Katherine suddenly looked older. "I'd hoped he would prove to be more his mother's son than his father's; she raised him, after all, and she has a fearsome sense of responsibility."

Arlen smiled. "Fearsome, indeed. And I'd argue that his father did, too, in his way. But we digress. These…enthusiasms: does Lord Theron cherish them for unsuitable causes, too?"

"No," said Katherine decidedly. "Ideas, yes. Causes, no. And don't try to tell me that having ideas leads to treasonous impulses, because that horse won't run. He's casting around for a center to his life, but I don't for a moment believe this king business is it. Whatever kind of fool Theron may be, he's not dangerous, not in that way."

Arlen considered this, his chin resting on his steepled fingers. "Very well. I trust your judgment. But if he's not dangerous, he would be well advised to stop behaving as if he were. Since MidWinter, I seem to stumble over him wherever I turn."

It was the gentlest of playful thrusts. Katherine parried smoothly. "I'll just have to keep him out from under your feet, won't I?"

"That," said Arlen, "would be very nice." He rose. "The Tremontaine duchesses have been so much more satisfactory than the dukes."

"How thoughtful of me not to marry," Katherine snapped, out of patience. "Go away, Arlen. You've had your say, and I want my bath. All that ails Theron is too much freedom and too little discipline. He's a good boy at heart."

"His heart is not what concerns me, Duchess," Arlen said dryly, whereupon Katherine laughed and rang the bell and indulged in friendly small-talk until Farraday arrived to show Lord Arlen to his waiting carriage. When he'd gone, Katherine did not immediately seek her bath, but sat down at her desk, wrote a brief, emphatic note, sealed it, and directed it to Lord Theron Campion at Riverside House. Then she sat staring at the letter until her maid Molly came

down to bully her upstairs and out of her sweaty clothes. She was very stiff indeed.

THERON WAS AT HOME IN RIVERSIDE HOUSE WHEN HIS cousin's note arrived. He was in the library, a delightful cave of a room with heavy curtains, thick rugs and well-stuffed chairs, and books that seemed to breathe dust. It was a cold day; a fire roared in the grate, but still he had himself wrapped in a beat-up old quilt. He was reading a famous essay on the difference between power and persuasion. His mind kept straying from the main point, wondering hazily if anything in the essay would be of use to Basil in preparing his debate.

He was not pleased to be handed an envelope with the duchess's crest. Written herself, not dictated by a secretary; it could not be good.

It wasn't. Nor was it particularly informative. Visit her on Monday week. Matters of state to discuss. He turned the paper over, as if there were a translation on the back. *Matters of state.* What in the Seven Hells had he to do with matters of state?

Theron stretched, and swore again. It was no use trying to read anything serious now. He couldn't concentrate. He went upstairs to frame an answer, and found an old pile of invitations he'd been ignoring. One was from Charlie Talbert, son of the odious cousin Gregory, inviting him to join some friends in a theatre party. Poor Charlie had never been interested in theatre before, but he was courting a girl who was mad for it. He'd begged the use of the Tremontaine box from Katherine; presumably Theron would be another ornament to the event. It was this afternoon, after lunch and before his evening lecture. Theron shrugged; why not? Maybe Charlie knew something of the matters of state. Or his father had let slip something. He dashed off a note to Charlie, penned a polite response to Katherine, and shouted for Terence to find him something decent to wear.

THERON COULD BE PERFECTLY POLITE WHEN HE remembered to be, and he really did exert himself with Charlie and his friends, so much so that Charlie's sweetheart, Lady Elizabeth Horn, asked later what all the fuss was about the Mad Duke's son, since Lord Theron had been pleasant, even if his hair was somewhat ridiculous.

The play was dull, one of those comedies about lovers kept from marrying each other by endless misunderstandings. But Theron wasn't looking much at

the stage. His eyes kept straying to the Randall box, where the Lady Genevieve sat, surrounded by suitable chaperones. Lady Genevieve Randall was dressed all in white, like a nymph of winter, with silver drops in her ears and brilliants glittering high in her soft dark hair and around her slim neck. He found himself delighted by the way her hand flew to her mouth at the comic scenes, the careful way she always turned her head to reply to her friends' comments, the air of propriety that breathed from her like perfume.

And suddenly he knew why he had come. Genevieve was the answer to all his problems.

At the interval, he bought a bunch of white hothouse violets from a flower-girl, and gained admittance to the Randall box. Lady Randall was delighted to see him. Genevieve ducked her head to smell his bouquet, and smiled up at him between her dark lashes. His heart jumped in his chest, and he knew there would be no impediment to his desires.

"I wish," he said, to be sure, "that I could escort you to your carriage after the play. But I must dash off to attend a lecture."

"At the University?" the girl said.

"Yes. I study there. You must think me very dull."

"Oh, no," said Lady Genevieve. "It must be terribly exciting."

"It is exciting." Theron bowed, and took his leave.

He nearly danced back to his seat, and saw nothing of the final act. Everything unfolded before him in perfect sequence, like a well-made length of brocade rolling off the loom, flowers and ribbons and curlicues all patterned as they should be. He would not tell Basil, not yet. Basil had kept the challenge from him; well, he would keep his secret too, though in the end it was one that would please his lover well. A little social fuss, a legal ceremony, and everything would be in place, with Theron free to live the life he chose, as he chose to live it. How could anyone object to that?

chapter IV

SOME TIME AFTER INFORMING LORD NICHOLAS Galing of the debate between St Cloud and Crabbe, Henry Fremont wrote his patron one last letter.

I have thought about it, he wrote, *and I have decided that I am not cut out for a spy. I don't like being responsible for people going to jail, even irritating fools like Finn and Lindley and their Northern friends. I think Doctor St Cloud is an honest man and a great scholar, and I don't think he would give a bean-fed fart for a new king. All he's interested in is truth, and if you're going to put him in prison for that, then I don't want to be part of it.*

He'd signed himself *Your Humble & Ob'd't Sv't*, with an ironic flourish.

Nicholas swore long and fluently. After all he'd done for that miserable hat-rack, he had the brass-bottomed gall to quit? He deserved to be thrown in the Chop for questioning—or brought straight to Nicholas himself. It would be pure pleasure, Nicholas thought, to torture information out of the rude historian, and it would pay Arlen back for not asking him to attend the questioning of the Northerners. Feeling much more cheerful, he called for his servant to drag Henry out of his scholarly lair, considered the irritation of actually having to be in the same room with him, and decided not to bother. Instead, he dashed off a note to Lord Arlen: *My University contact broken; shall I make another? I must talk to you.* He scratched out the last line, wrote *I am ready to make a preliminary report on the Northern matter. Would tomorrow afternoon be convenient?* and sent it off with his servant. The servant returned without an answer, which did nothing to sweeten Galing's temper.

If Galing was still angry when he showed up at Lord Filisand's some hours later, none of his fellow guests would have known it. Dispensing smiles and embraces, he moved through Filisand's stuffy, overheated rooms looking for someone who was well-acquainted with Lord Theron Campion. The University was not Galing's world; he'd been a fool to try and enter it without knowing how it worked. But the Hill—the Hill was his native hunting ground. He'd caught Arlen's eye because of his ability to nose out noble secrets elegantly and thoroughly. And Lord Theron Campion of Tremontaine was a noble, whether he

liked it or not. Nicholas knew in his hunter's bones that, no matter who else was involved, Lord Theron was at the heart of the whole affair. Thanks to Ysaud, Nicholas possessed the bait to lure Lord Theron. All he needed was to get close enough to set the trap.

Thus Lord Filisand's supper, a weekly evening of cards, food, and talk through which almost every man on the Hill passed sooner or later. Wives were not welcome, nor daughters, sisters, or even mistresses. Men came to gamble, to flirt, to discuss horses or swordsmen or votes on troublesome measures up before the Council—to enjoy themselves, in short, without having to worry about moderating their tongues or their consumption of brandy-punch. Ancient history had kept Galing away since MidWinter. Now he must make up for lost time.

"Absolutely tied to my bed," he explained solemnly to Lord Condell, who wanted to know where he'd been hiding. And then he winked, which caused Condell to call him a naughty man and tap him on the wrist with a fan of brown silk. The fan was new—clearly the latest cry of fashion. Galing noticed several men busily plying them against the fug. Even young Lord Clarence Randall had taken up the fad, awkwardly flapping a girlish scrap of pink lace before his sweating face. The boy looked like an idiot. A charitable impulse, inspired by having won a great deal of money from him at Davenant's MidWinter card party, sent Galing to his rescue.

"Hot, isn't it?" asked Randall plaintively.

"Lord Filisand suffers terribly from the cold," Galing explained. "And we suffer with him. The fans are an inspiration. It would do you more good, however, if you held it like this"—he adjusted the fan in Randall's fingers—"and moved it thus, from the wrist." He watched Randall critically, nodded, and said, "That's better. But may I say without offense, that your fan is perhaps a bit…delicate for your hand? A larger one would be more effective."

"It's my sister's," Randall confided. "I pinched it from the hall table." He eyed the spangled lace doubtfully. "Likely she'll have my ears for taking it."

"Surely not," said Galing, beginning to be bored, "if she left it lying about."

"She didn't. She left it behind because Campion gave her a new one. Had to carry it—manners, you know. Devilish attached to this one."

Galing was no longer bored. "What's a fan, more or less," he said carelessly, "when you have a lover to give you new ones?"

"That's what I thought," Randall agreed. He leaned forward to murmur in Galing's ear. He smelled of brandy-punch. "Theron Campion's spending a devilish lot of time with her, if you know what I mean. They're seeing *Fair Rosamund* at Kean's. Very romantic play, *Rosamund*."

Galing plucked the fan from Randall's hand and furled it neatly. "It is indeed, and one of my favorites besides. Let us abandon this amazingly hot room and refresh ourselves at the well of immortal love." Lord Clarence goggled at him. Unoffended, Galing laughed. "The play, man, the play. I propose we go to see *Fair Rosamund*."

They reached the theatre just as the third act was beginning. Lord Clarence led Galing to the Randall box and introduced him to his mother, Lady Randall, in a piercing whisper. Lady Randall looked only moderately pleased to see her son and his friend, and when Lord Theron would have given up his seat at the front of the box to Galing, she declared that she was feeling quite faint and would rather sit at the back. So Galing settled himself beside Lord Theron, fixed his eyes on the stage, and turned over ways of intriguing the irritating young heir of Tremontaine into a private conversation.

It wasn't going to be easy to get his attention. Every time Galing glanced away from the posturing actors, Campion was turned toward the Randall girl, his knee breaking the white foam of her voluminous skirts. Once he heard her murmur something; once he heard her sigh: Lord Theron's courtship seemed to be proceeding well. Remembering Henry's history lessons, Galing wondered how a queen might figure in his plans.

On stage, King Alexander Ravenhair, in a long black wig and a short tunic that showed his excellent legs, was hurling poetic defiance at the evil Wizard Guidry, who was listening with a patience remarkable in so choleric a personality. Galing chuckled. Startled, Campion glanced over his shoulder at him. Galing cocked his brow at the stage, rolled his eyes, and gnashed his teeth. Campion's lips twitched in unwilling amusement before he turned again to Genevieve. At the interval, he allowed himself to be distracted from her long enough for Galing to strike up a conversation about how a good actor might transform a bad play.

"Have you seen Mistress Sedley at the Buttery?" he asked. "Her voice is pure alchemy, able to turn the hoariest bombast into tragic gold. They say she's the Black Rose come again."

"Ah." Campion was politely interested. "There's a portrait of the Black Rose as the Empress hanging in the breakfast-room in Riverside House. I quite feel she's a member of the family."

"The Black Rose, or the Empress?"

"Oh, both. I always think of them together."

Galing was visited by inspiration. "I believe Mistress Sedley has chosen *The Empress* for her subscription performance. I usually take a small party to these events—shall I include you?"

Campion, with one eye on Lady Genevieve, professed himself flattered and begged Galing to tell him the date. Galing suspected that the boy was only being civil because of his audience, but it didn't matter: Galing could now claim acquaintance with him. And the young man's interest in the Randall chit added considerably to the value of Ysaud's paintings.

Nicholas settled back to watch the last act of *Rosamund* in a mood of happy confidence.

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ARE A QUARRELSOME LOT AT the best of times. Young blood runs hot and rises suddenly to a boil in defense of its passion, whether it be a man or a woman, an idea or an ideal. Nearly every winter brought a cause to divide the University into factions that spat when they met in the street and occasionally blacked one another's eyes.

Older magisters reminisced about the academic feuds of their youth, when students threw rotten fruit at Doctor Darlington of Geography when he debated Doctor Russom over the earth's roundness, and carried Weedin of Rhetoric shoulder-high through the streets, waving his defeated rival's gown behind him like a banner. But not even the oldest of them could remember feelings running quite as high as over the ancient historians' debate.

In the King's Horn, where Governors, Chairs, and the older magisters were accustomed to drink undisturbed by lesser mortals, it was generally agreed that young Doctor St Cloud had gone too far. It was all very well to shake things up—that was what young magisters did, what they themselves had done in their salad days. But to declare the wizards were real and their magic true! First off, he couldn't possibly prove it, not by those so-called "new scholarly methods" of his, not by any methods at all.

Doctor Leonard Rugg walked into the thick of it one afternoon when he joined his old magister and sponsor, Doctor Polycarp of Metaphysics, for a friendly cup of the Horn's famous brandy-punch.

"It's a thing that shouldn't be proved, whether it's true or not," Polycarp was saying as Rugg approached. "Ah, Rugg, there you are. Take a cup, lad, and sit down. Doctor Standish and I were just talking about this challenge business. Standish, you remember Leonard Rugg. I know you're not much on metaphysics, but you ought to hear him on the Essence of Being."

Rugg disclaimed modestly, declared himself honored, dipped himself a fragrant cup of punch from the pewter bowl on the table, and installed himself in a comfortably shabby chair.

"It's a bad business," Polycarp went on. "Bad for the City, bad for the University. I don't know what the Governors were about to allow it."

"They can't refuse permission for an academic challenge," said Standish. "It's a bad precedent."

Rugg struggled briefly with the knowledge that he ought to keep out of this, and lost. "Just so," he said cordially. "It's what academic challenges are for, after all: to bring up uncomfortable subjects and put them to public scrutiny, find out the truth, whatever it may be."

"Truth!" Polycarp snorted. "The truth is, magic is nasty and unnatural, whether it's 'real' or not."

"What," said Standish, "is 'real' anyway, in this context? No one disputes that the wizards did *something*, something they made a great mystery of, something that did considerable harm. That's 'real' enough. I don't see that there's anything to dispute."

"Of course there is," Rugg said. "The harm came from the mystery. Remember what Arvin said: 'Truth is a lamp. Shuttered, covered, hidden, it illuminates nothing, and leaves us stumbling in the dark.'"

"Arvin wasn't talking about magic," Polycarp objected. "He was talking about metaphysics. In any case, we already know the truth about the wizards. From Vespas on down, the authorities are in absolute agreement. It's as if this Basil St Cloud has offered to prove that the sun rises in the west. It's pointless and useless and dangerous."

"That's what Doctor Crabbe says, certainly," Rugg began, "but—"

"St Cloud, too," Polycarp barreled on. "Dangerous, I mean, and ambitious. I wouldn't be astonished to learn that he means to throw over the faculty and the Governors and turn the University into a college for wizards."

Rugg looked at Standish, who was shaking his head in somber disapproval. "Well, I'd be astonished," Leonard Rugg burst out. "I've never heard such nonsense. In the first place, if magic isn't real, how could St Cloud teach it? And in the second, I know the man, and he hasn't an ambitious thought in his head."

Understandably offended, Polycarp puffed himself out like an owl. "Nonsense, is it?"

"Don't rise to his bait, Poly," Standish said. "He's one of them. I've heard your name, Rugg. You're St Cloud's second, aren't you?"

With the two old men glaring at him, Rugg was overcome with a complex mixture of defiance and fear he hadn't felt since he was twenty. "Yes, I am," he snapped. "What of it?"

Polycarp bristled. “Keep a civil tongue in your head; that’s the Halliday Chair of Mathematics you’re speaking to.”

Standish said, “You tell young St Cloud that he’s likely to end by being stripped of his position and his rank. It’s a pity, as bright as he is, but he’s only himself to blame, making a mockery of the University and her institutions. He can still withdraw, save us all a lot of grief. You tell him.”

Leonard Rugg set his untouched punch down gently on the table and said, “I will, Doctor Standish. But he won’t withdraw.” He stood up. “You’re quite right to be nervous of St Cloud. This debate will show the whole lot of you how true scholarship works against a moribund tradition that should have been put down along with the dead kings! What price the Halliday Chair then?”

He bowed and beat a strategic retreat.

LEONARD RUGG WAS NOT THE ONLY MAN TO JOIN battle in St Cloud’s cause. Students quarreled with their magisters and with each other. Catchwords began to appear: a sure sign of trouble. “Wizard’s boy” was a taunt that could bring erstwhile friends to blows. Some of the noble students, or their families, took umbrage at the subject of the debate and stopped coming to classes altogether. Peter Godwin might have been one of them, had his grandfather, Michael, Lord Godwin, not required his parents to let the boy follow his own loyalties without interference. This inspired Peter to examine his loyalty to St Cloud and his cause very carefully indeed.

“It’s not St Cloud, really,” he told his grandfather, with an air of astonished discovery.

The old man was amused. “It’s not?”

“It’s true he’s a great teacher, and he never laughs at you the way some of them do and he makes you feel brighter than you thought you were. But that’s not worth fighting for.”

“Are you planning to fight?” Lord Godwin inquired gently. “If so, perhaps we should add swordsmanship to your course of study.”

“Don’t tease me, Grandfather. I’m serious. What St Cloud is going to debate has to do with our right to speak the truth, no matter who objects. And that’s worth fighting for.”

“Oh, dear,” said Michael Godwin. “You’d better see your knife is sharp, then.”

“It’s not that kind of fighting,” his grandson said.

PERHAPS IT WASN'T KNIFE FIGHTING, BUT IT WAS close enough. Coming out of LeClerc one day, St Cloud and his followers were set upon by a dozen Crabbites, none of them quite sober.

"Traitor!" they shouted. "Wizard's bumboys! Superstitious pigs!" And they let loose a volley of rotten apples and snowballs. One of the latter, packed around a stone, hit Benedict Vandeleur on the arm. He let out a roar and swung his fist at the foremost Crabbite, a bulky man with a wild shock of curls, who roared back like the bull he resembled and set himself to wrestle Vandeleur to the ground. Justis Blake swore, pushed Doctor St Cloud into the safety of the arched doorway, and launched himself into the melee.

It would have been more fun for everyone concerned if the street had not been freezing cold, with yesterday's snowfall churned to a frozen mush with mud and filth. Blake's knuckles stung and ached with each blow he landed. Beside him, Peter Godwin was sobbing with pain or anger, tears runnelling his muddy face as he flailed at his sneering opponent. Blake tripped the sneering man, who fell heavily back into the man Blake had been fighting, who reflexively punched him before he realized that they were on the same side. Blake laughed, seized them both by the scruffs of their gowns, and banged their heads together with a great crack. He was beginning to warm up nicely.

Suddenly, a Crabbite at the edge of the fight shook off his opponent and took to his heels, shouting, "The Watch! The Watch!" Two of his fellows followed him, dragging a downed friend between them. Blake heard the telltale whistle, close and drawing closer. He froze, as did his opponent, stared wildly around, and dropped into the mud, felled by a farewell blow to his jaw.

By the time the Watch sauntered onto the scene, the street was empty. Trampled mud, three mangled caps, a muffler, and a torn sleeve bore silent witness to the recent combat, but combatants there were none. The Watch shrugged, pocketed their whistles, and went back to their warm guard-house. It was nothing to them if the idiots all killed each other, as long as they cleared away the bodies after.

Inside LeClerc, Doctor St Cloud was rather helplessly stanching Peter Godwin's bleeding nose with his own handkerchief, while Fremont and Vandeleur revived Blake with a handful of snow. One man had lost his sleeve; a bruise spread like an inkstain across another's cheek. Lindley was nursing a sore jaw and scraped knuckles. They were all filthy, shivering with cold and reaction, and chattering sixteen to the dozen.

"Did you see the buggers run?" inquired Vandeleur happily.

"We showed them who were the better men." Godwin's voice was rather muffled by the handkerchief.

"They called us traitors!" Fremont was indignant. "Reactionary pigs!"

A chorus of agreement: "They're nothing but sheep! Parrots! Geese!"

"Silence!" St Cloud, who had been listening to all this with mounting impatience, lost his temper. "You are carrying on like small boys at a fair," he said into the astonished lull. "We are civilized men, are we not? We settle our differences with words, not blows; reasoned arguments, not curses. Are you dockmen, or are you scholars of ancient history?"

Glances were exchanged, sullen or shamefaced or amused. *Poor Doctor St Cloud*, Blake thought muzzily. *Who's going to tell him?*

Oddly enough, it was Lindley. His flaming hair was quenched with mud, and his narrow jaw sported a painful-looking lump, but he spoke clearly and proudly. "We are scholars of ancient history. We are scholars of truth. There are those who must silence truth at all costs. When they come at us with blows and curses, what may we do but answer them in kind?"

"Well said, Lindley!" exclaimed Vandeleur, astonished, and there was a murmur of approval from the other students. Lindley blushed scarlet and sucked blood from his knuckles.

St Cloud shook his head. "I am ashamed to be the cause of this," he said. But even as he said it, he knew that he was lying. There was something in him that gloried in the sight of these young men, battered and bleeding in his cause—something that accepted their service as its due, that counted each drop of blood shed as an offering. "But you have fought nobly, and I am proud of you for that, at least."

They all looked pleased with themselves. St Cloud considered telling them not to fight again unless attacked, decided that would be spitting into the wind, and recommended that they clean themselves up before going to the Nest, "to save Max the trouble of kicking you all out as vagabonds." This mild jest raised a laugh, so he went on, "I'll go ahead and bespeak a pie for you." And then he left them.

THE BLACKBIRD'S NEST WAS NOT IMMUNE TO THE general late-winter infection of change and upset. It was no longer the cheerful haunt of humanities scholars out for a drink and a good argument, but a kind of radicals' headquarters, full of St Cloudites of all academic persuasions. Whatever they thought of St Cloud personally, they all agreed that Truth was to be found in the examination of

empirical data rather than in the writings of previous generations. There were contingents of astronomists, physicians, and natural scientists of all kinds. And there were Northerners.

There'd always been some Northerners at the Blackbird's Nest: they were an insular lot, but not too insular to drink with their fellow students from time to time. Now there were more of them, making faces over Max's excellent beer when he ran out of cider, and repelling friendly advances with stony silence. But not Anthony Lindley's.

To everyone's astonishment, Lindley often forsook Historians' Corner for the Northerners' table, and even took to wearing his hair in the multiple braids they affected. Whatever unpleasantness there may have been between them over Finn, Greenleaf, and Smith, had obviously been forgotten. He and the Northerners were, as Fremont put it, thick as gruel.

"I wonder what he sees in them?" Peter Godwin wondered one frozen afternoon. "It's not as if they have anything in common with him—they're all natural scientists and lawyers and physicians."

"And they're all dreamers at heart," Blake explained. "They share a vision of the ancient North as an enchanted land, and they'd love to wake up one morning and discover that enchantment returned."

Vandeleur added, "There's hating Finn's guts. They've got that in common, too."

"The incendiary Master Finn," said Godwin. "I do wonder what has become of him. He can't still be in the Chop, surely."

Vandeleur shrugged. "They could have forgotten about him or mislaid him, I suppose; but it's more likely that he took off downriver as soon as they let him go. He did betray his friends, after all, and, as far as I know, Greenleaf and Smith are still in prison. The Northerners don't impress me as being as understanding and tolerant as our kindhearted Blake here."

Blake fetched Vandeleur a gentle clip on the head, designed to demonstrate just how tolerant and understanding he really was. Vandeleur shoved him back, and there might have been a friendly scuffle had not Anthony Lindley joined them, tankard in hand.

He endured his friends' jocular comments on his hair and his choice of companions with a reasonably good grace. "My grandmother," he explained, "was from the North—well, her father was. It makes a difference." But that was all, so soon the talk turned to the ever-absorbing topic of their researches. They'd been spending hours in the Archives every day, going through boxes and document cases, unrolling scrolls, deciphering unfamiliar handwriting, breathing ancient

dust. So far, they'd found very little of obvious value, but Doctor St Cloud was pleased with them, and they were not discouraged. Lindley was just describing a book on Northern customs he'd found, illustrated with woodcuts, when a street urchin of indeterminate sex inquired shrilly for scholar Anthony Lindley.

Henry Fremont, who'd been remarkably subdued recently, beckoned the child closer. "You Lindley?" the child inquired. "Scholar says Lindley'll give me a copper."

"Why," asked Fremont mildly, "should Lindley give you a copper?"

The urchin held up a twist of paper, very dirty and mangled at the ends. Fremont held out his hand for it. "Not without you be Lindley, and not without you give me a copper," said the urchin. "Scholar promised."

From the other end of the table, Lindley said, "I'm the man you're looking for. Bring it here."

The child squeezed between the benches. "Where's my copper?"

Lindley put the coin into the urchin's hand, accepted the paper, untwisted it, and began to read. "Be damned if I do," he said aloud. "Where's that child?"

But the urchin had disappeared. "What is it?" asked Blake.

"Finn," Lindley answered shortly. "He wants me to meet him in the oak grove outside the North Gate at dawn tomorrow. I don't know which is worse: if he thinks I don't know he betrayed Greenleaf and Smith, or if he imagines that I'll forgive him for it."

"Will you go?" Godwin asked.

"I've no desire to set eyes on him again. And you may spare me the lecture on tolerance, Blake, because you don't really know what's at stake here."

Blake shrugged. Lindley's self-identification with the Northern cause, whatever it was, was beginning to get up his nose.

"Don't be such a little prig, Lindley," said Vandeleur, disgusted. "It's hardly fair to condemn a man unheard."

"I agree with Vandeleur," said Henry Fremont unexpectedly. "People can do very stupid things for what seem, at the time, to be very sound reasons. Look at the Union, for instance. It was hardly a good thing for the North, in the long run."

"Don't try to change the subject," Lindley said. "I don't care what Finn's reasons were. What he did was unforgivable. He is less than a beast, for a beast has no choice in what it does, but acts from instinct only."

Vandeleur made one last try. "If the choice is between torture and betrayal, I think most of us here—yes, and most of your Northern friends, too—would choose to keep their limbs intact, even at the expense of their honor."

"I wouldn't have told them anything, no matter what they did to me."

Blake lost his temper. "But they didn't do anything to you, did they?" he inquired savagely. "When they heard your Southern accent and your Southern name, they put you in a cell to think over your poor taste in lovers, patted you on the head, and let you go. You loved this man, Tony, or at least you led us to believe you did. The *honorable* thing for you to do is hear what he has to say."

Everyone stared at Blake, who glared back. What was it about scholarship and learning, he wondered, that seemed to wither the hearts of University men, leaving them incapable of loving anything as imperfect and fallible as an actual human being? Now they were going to laugh at him for getting so heated about the feelings of a man none of them particularly liked, and he was going to have to thump them.

But Godwin turned to Lindley and said, "Blake's right."

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Vandeleur agreed.

"In fact," Fremont pointed out, "Finn's behaving very honorably. He could have just slunk off down the river without telling anyone."

"Oh, very well," Lindley said. "I'll go. But I won't go alone."

Blake stood up. "If what you're trying to say is that you're going to turn Alaric Finn over to your Northern friends, I swear I'll tie you up and keep watch over you all night. Revenge and kings and such are very romantic, but we live *now*, in the modern age, when men settle their differences in a civilized manner."

"You're a damn do-gooding busybody," said Lindley hotly. "A sanctimonious, preaching, clod-hopping—"

"Watch it, Lindley," Godwin said, alarmed at the look on Blake's face.

"—mama's boy," Lindley finished.

It was enough. "You're lucky I'm a damn do-gooding mama's boy," Blake said, as steadily as his pounding heart would let him, "or I might forget that you're smaller than I am, and still weak from prison fever, and feed you your teeth, one by one." He turned on his heel and, with considerable dignity, left the Blackbird's Nest.

"You're an ass, Lindley," said Vandeleur, and followed him.

Lindley looked after them with a strange expression, half-frightened, half-triumphant. "So the ox has a temper after all."

Fremont cast his eyes to the smoky ceiling. "You'd try the patience of a stone, Lindley. You're right, though. Blake is a do-gooding busybody, and I'm grateful for someone other than me pointing it out. I tell you what. You don't snap my head off, and I come with you to meet Finn tomorrow, just in case he gets

melodramatic and tries to persuade you to fly with him or some such nonsense. That's what you're afraid of, isn't it?"

"I'm not afraid," Lindley began, then: "Yes. I guess so."

"I'll come too," said Godwin, all agog with the romance of it all. "I'd like to hear what Finn has to say for himself. However"—with a level look that would have made his grandfather proud—"you have to swear you won't tell your Northern friends about this."

Lindley looked from one stern face to the other and nodded.

"Swear," said Fremont, not to be outdone by a noble's whelp.

"By oak and holly, by blood and bone, I swear I'll tell no living man of our meeting. Will that do?"

It would, and the three friends drank to it and parted.

IT WAS STILL DARK WHEN THEY MET AT THE NORTH GATE next morning, and as cold as the Ice Maiden's breath. Godwin and Fremont were heavy-eyed and sullen, Lindley haggard and grim-faced.

Once, the oak grove had been visible from the North Gate, and the path had lain through wide meadows grazed by cattle and ponds noisy with water fowl. But the city, like a fountain with the wind behind it, had spattered inns and smithies for the convenience of travelers among the farmsteads, which were followed in time by city-folk hungry for a bit of green. Now the grove was at the city's edge: in another generation, it would be within city bounds, if not swallowed altogether.

Snow had fallen in the night, although it was hard to tell until the little band came past the outermost houses and saw it spread like a featherbed between them and the grove. Remembering MidWinter, Fremont shivered and opened his mouth to suggest a retreat to the nearest inn and let Finn and his confession go hang. But Lindley stepped out into the feathery snow with Godwin beside him. What could Fremont do, but step out after them, or admit that he was afraid of a stand of trees?

A half-hour's hard slogging brought them to the eaves of the grove, where the going grew rougher still. Snow hid stones and logs and uneven ground; to brush against a branch was to bring a numbing avalanche upon their heads. Soon all three were soaked to the skin and chilled to the bone.

Through chattering teeth, Godwin said, "Let's go back. He's not here."

"He is," said Lindley.

"He is not," snapped Godwin. "We were fools to come so far. No man has come here this morning—ours are the only tracks in."

Henry cursed and turned to retrace his steps, but Lindley said, "He's here. I know it. Come and see. It's only a little further," and pressed on without a backward glance.

Undecided, Fremont and Godwin hung fire, then turned again to follow the beacon of Lindley's hair through the black maze of branches. He was right—it was only a little further. Another two or three minutes brought them to the edge of the glade, where they saw Alaric Finn.

Henry knew at once that he was dead. Live men do not have blue lips and bluish-white skin like fine marble, nor do they lie unshivering, naked, and half-covered with snow. It was a little longer before he took in the wide scarlet stains that haloed Finn's outstretched hands.

A retching noise told him that one of his companions was reacting badly. Godwin, it must be, since Lindley was kneeling by the body.

"Is he alive?" Fremont croaked hopefully as Lindley laid his hand upon the snow-covered chest.

"No." The single syllable hung in the air like a bird. "He has poured his blood upon the land, and the land has drunk of it."

"Ah," said Fremont, and turned away from the macabre tableau to help Godwin, who was almost as pale as poor Finn, but trying very hard to act the man.

"We should tell someone, shouldn't we?" he said, his hazel eyes round with the effort of not looking at the glade, his voice pinched. "There's an inn, not a hundred paces west, right on the Northern Road. The coaches stop there; they'll know what to do."

Fremont risked a glance over his shoulder. Lindley's fiery head was bowed to his lover's chest. "You go," he told Godwin, his lips stiff. "I don't want to leave him alone."

Godwin nodded and fled. Fremont squared his shoulders, stalked into the glade, touched Lindley's back. The fabric of his gown was stiff with frost. "Godwin's gone for help," he said. "There's a log over there we can sit on while we wait. I've got some lucifers. We might try to make a fire."

Lindley didn't even look up. He took Finn's hand, gloved with blood, and tried to raise it, but the arm was locked with death or cold. He bent his head to the hand and kissed it.

Henry swallowed. "We should leave him as he is, don't you think? In case there should be an inquiry?"

"There will be no inquiry," said Lindley. "It was a lawful sacrifice. See? Here is the knife." He opened his hand to display a penknife—Finn's penknife—unpleasantly stained from blade to haft. Lindley's palm was smeared scarlet where he'd clutched it.

"Where did you find that?" Fremont demanded.

"Just here." Lindley dropped the knife by Finn's right leg, then wiped his hand across his own cheek, leaving an untidy smear. He bent once more, to press his lips against the slack, blue mouth, and then he rose and followed Fremont to the log and watched quietly while he fussed with damp tinder and leaves and his lucifers until a distant crashing heralded Godwin's return with the ostler and two barmen from the Nag's Head and a plank to tie the body on. Then it was all large men trampling the snow and exclaiming and asking questions that Henry was shivering too hard to answer, and a parlor in the Nag's Head with hot wine punch and their coats and gowns steaming in front of the fire.

The host of the Nag's Head was not best pleased to be saddled with a corpse, naked as a frog and a suicide to boot, as likely a haunt as the host could imagine. If it had just been Lindley and Fremont who brought it to his attention, he'd have left them to drag the body away as best they could. But young Godwin was a noble's son. So the host set up a trestle for the corpse in the woodshed and sacrificed a horse-blanket to cover its nakedness and provided young Lord Peter and his friends with a parlor, a fire, bread and meat, and blankets to wrap themselves in while their clothes dried. He gave them an hour to recover themselves, and then he tapped at the parlor door to inquire what they intended to do with the poor young man's body.

This was just what had been puzzling Henry Fremont while he toasted and rubbed some feeling back into his numbed hands and feet. He'd asked Godwin and Lindley, of course, but they were of no help. Godwin wanted to leave it all in the hands of the host, along with a gold piece for Finn's burial. Fremont thought the host likely to keep the gold for himself and tip Finn behind a rock in the grove for the foxes and rats to gnaw.

This conjecture drove the blood from Godwin's cheeks and tears to his eyes, and he refused to take further part in the conversation. Lindley, on the other hand, thought the grove a very good resting-place for Finn's body, and the foxes and rats his natural mourners. "Flowers will grow where he lies, fair as he was fair, and his flesh will hallow the grove."

"That's very poetic, Lindley," Fremont said. "But he's not going to hallow the grove, so you can just shut up. Be sensible for a moment. Did he have family? Friends? Anyone who might claim his body for burial?"

"A Companion of the King has no family, save his brothers to whom he is sworn," said Lindley.

"What in the Seven Hells is a Companion of the…" Henry interrupted himself hastily. "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. Can you get word to them, tell them he's dead and wants burying?"

"He is forsworn," said Lindley. "He is without honor, without brothers." His dense blue eyes were flat as buttons. "Without life."

So it was all up to Fremont, who'd never organized anything more practical than a formal argument in his life, to answer the host's questions and decide what must be done. The host, with one eye on Peter Godwin, was moderately helpful. He provided a chaise to convey the young gentlemen to their homes in the city, and agreed to keep their poor friend in the woodshed until they might make provision for his burial.

"No longer than a day or two, mind, and don't go thinking to leave him here forever while you go about your business fancy-free. I don't doubt Lord Godwin won't like to hear how you left a man to rot in my woodshed without a backward glance."

Henry thought of several clever things to say calculated to let the host of the Nag's Head know just what kind of a blackmailing, boot-licking, ignorant blubber-head he was. But tweaking the host's nose, though excellent sport in itself, would not get Godwin and Lindley home nor Finn buried. So Henry said they were all very much obliged and poked Godwin, who gave the host the contents of his purse and his solemn word as a Godwin that Finn would be out of the woodshed as soon as may be.

THAT NIGHT, ALONE IN HIS BED WITH A BOTTLE OF wine, Henry Fremont thought over the events of a long and unpleasant day.

Lindley had remained steadfast in his refusal to tell the Companions of Finn's death. "You made me swear by oak and holly that I'd tell no man of our meeting. That oath binds me still."

Fremont and Godwin had plied him with every argument they could lay tongue to, but nothing could move him. Disgusted, they'd left him in the middle of the street and gone to consult with Blake and Vandeleur, pulling them out of the Nest to the neutral territory of the Bramble Bush. There they sat down with tankards of watered ale and talked over what was to be done.

There were two issues to be considered. The first, and most pressing, was how to get Finn's body out of the Nag's Head woodshed and decently interred. The

second was to decide whether or not to tell Doctor St Cloud about what had happened.

"Not," Vandeleur said. "He doesn't even know Finn was in prison. It would be too much, what with the debate and all."

"I don't think we should tell him any of it, ever," said Godwin. "It would upset him horribly."

"Perhaps," Blake said. "I think he'd rather know the truth, however upsetting. But I agree he doesn't need to know it now."

So that was one decision made. The question of Finn's body was harder. Long into the afternoon, they considered ways and means with as much care as the Governors brought to a Fellowship appointment. Finally, Vandeleur said, "Look. All we know about his family is the name, and that they live in Finnhaven, which is about as far North as you can get. We've determined that a message couldn't possibly reach them before the host at the Nag's Head loses patience. We agree that we could just scrape enough together to get him buried ourselves, but that still leaves the question of his family. I really don't know what's best to do."

"He might have kin among the Northerners," Blake pointed out, not for the first time.

"Are you going to ask them?" Godwin inquired sarcastically. "We've already decided they'd rather cut off their braids than talk to us."

Throughout the conversation, Henry had been struggling with complicated emotions. If Alaric Finn had been a traitor, he himself was another. He did not have to be a metaphysician to realize that the argument that he had sent Lord Nicholas little but his lecture notes and a few pieces of common gossip anyone might have heard in any tavern in University was pure sophistry. He had given Lord Nicholas Finn's name, and Lindley's, and now Finn was dead.

"I'll ask them," he'd heard himself saying. "If you three are frightened of a bunch of mop-head Northerners, I'm not."

He blushed now to think how astonished his friends had been at his offer. But they'd accepted it quickly enough, and now he had to do it or face the fact that he was not only a dupe and a traitor, but a coward to boot.

Having gotten so far, Henry Fremont corked up the wine, got out of bed, and composed a short and careful note:

Alaric Finn, Historian of the School of Humane Sciences, has died in the oak grove, by his own hand, of remorse. His body lies in the woodshed of the Nag's Head Inn, west of the oak grove. Whatsoever his life, his death was all honor.

He signed it, *A Friend*, folded it, put on his gown, and went out to find a boy to deliver it to the King's Companions at the Green Man.

chapter V

KATHERINE, DUCHESS TREMONTAINE, DID NOT avoid formality and ritual when they served a purpose. To receive her cousin and heir, she wore a gown of green and gold, the colors of her house, woven with its emblem, the swan on the waves. She had invited two other people—his mother, Lady Sophia, and her steward, Marcus Ffoliot—to attend the meeting, but she had not told them everything, and so she was the only one formally dressed. Marcus recognized the trappings of authority; Sophia merely complimented her on her lovely robes.

Theron stood before the duchess's desk until she invited him to sit down. Then he sat on the edge of his chair. No use pretending this wasn't going to be awful. He only hoped she would give him a chance to explain whatever crimes against the state he was supposed to have committed this time.

Her dress was formal, but her speech was not. She came straight to the point: "Theron," the duchess said, "people are watching you."

"I know." He tried not to sound childish. "I wish that they would not. But I suppose it's unavoidable. Even my cousin Talbert was warning me—"

"This does not concern Talbert and his gossips. I mean the Serpent and his people."

"What!" Theron half-started out of his chair. "But I've done nothing! The Last Night chase was a student prank; they must have figured that out by now. What right do they have—why on earth would they—" But the part of him that knew the City, knew the reason. Basil, the dead kings, the debate…They must know about him and Basil; half the University did. Did the duchess?

Katherine said, "I know you too well to suspect you of any kind of scheming. But they do not. Everything you do takes on double meaning, Theron, and I don't know where it will end. I think it is too much to ask you to suddenly overturn all your habits. You'll have to settle down someday, but I can't expect you to change overnight. And so I think it best that you leave the City for a while."

Oh, God, he thought, half-wanting to laugh, not Highcombe! Not with Basil's father there! He had no desire to go the country at all, but to be banished to Highcombe would be too much.

"I've pulled some strings," she went on, "and gotten you an appointment to an embassage." She smiled at Sophia. "To the Kyrillian Archipelago. I thought you might like to see where the other half of your family tree springs from."

For a moment, he was seeing them all through a veil of gray ash. Sophia was out of her chair, her hand on his pulse. But he looked past her at Katherine.

"I cannot," he said. "I cannot leave at present. I am going to be married."

Katherine leaned back, the wind knocked out of her sails. "Re-eally? To whom?"

"To Lady Genevieve Randall."

"Randall?" Sophia asked, bewildered. "The music people?"

"How nice. But, judging from her face, you don't appear to have told your mother about this."

"I was—I was going to. Today."

"Well, that's good, considering that you are underage. You will need the consent of your guardians."

"I think that she is very suitable," he bulled on. "The Randalls are an old family; they were created right after the Union. It's Lady Genevieve's first Season."

"Not bad," said Marcus. "Tell us about it."

"I've been paying her court these last weeks," Theron explained, "and I have reason to believe neither she nor her family would object to a formal offer. If you give your consent, I can propose very soon. She's young, so I think they'll want to wait on the wedding until the fall." And by fall, he hoped to see Basil established in the Horn Chair, the challenge and debate behind him, once more ready for love. "I do want to see Kyros, of course—it was terribly kind of you to think of it—maybe we could go there for our bridal trip. But in the meantime, do you think it might please the Council if I were married instead of exiled?"

Katherine said, "Are you offering me a bargain?"

"No, cousin." He was beginning to enjoy himself. "I intend to marry Lady Genevieve whatever happens. I grow tired of waiting to settle down, as if it were some sort of terrible weight that will eventually descend on me. I'd rather choose the time myself, and get it over with all at once."

There was a heavy silence, and then his mother said plaintively, "Theron, you don't know what you are saying."

He ignored her, holding Katherine's eyes, willing her to agree. He wished he knew what she was thinking. She'd recovered from her surprise and was looking particularly ducal. "Let me think about it," she said. "It could do very well, and I'll wish you every happiness. Marcus, will you look into the Randall family?"

THE CARRIAGE RIDE BACK TO RIVERSIDE WAS A QUIET but not a comfortable one. Sophia was thinking, Theron could tell that. He watched the high, blind walls of the Hill give way to the lighted windows and shuttered shop-fronts and chocolate houses of the Middle City, and prepared to take his medicine like a man.

He wasn't surprised when his mother waved away the chairs waiting by the Bridge to carry them home and strode out through Riverside's maze of streets with the linkboys trotting behind. If he was the Prince of Riverside, she was the Queen, at home here as she'd never be on the Hill, or even the University that she had bullied into accepting her. Voices called out to her as they walked: goodnights and greetings that she punctiliously returned. Once she stopped to reassure herself that a beggar's sores were nothing more than mustard and gum before giving him a copper and directing him to the dormitory she maintained behind the infirmary. "It's free," she told him. "They'll give you a blanket and soup, so go ahead and spend the coin any way you like. Just don't sleep in the street tonight. And if you want to beg in Riverside, you'd better see Battered Bob in the morning for permission."

The walk from the Bridge calmed them both to a degree, and it was more in sorrow than in anger that Sophia turned to her son and said, "What I do not understand is why you have not told me of all this earlier."

They had just entered Sophia's sitting-room, a comfortable apartment in the narrowest of the connected houses that made up Riverside House. It was dominated by a life-sized portrait of the late duke as a young man and a smaller one of Sophia, richly dressed and obviously pregnant.

Theron bit his lip. He'd deceived her, if only by omission; his sole recourse was complete honesty. "I was afraid you'd try to talk me out of it," he said.

"You were correct." Sophia sank into her favorite shabby chair and gazed up at him with dark, steady eyes. "I will still try to talk you out of it. If I succeed, I shall myself explain to Katherine that you have thought better of your plan."

Theron dragged a puffy leather ottoman to her feet and settled himself on it. "It's a very good plan," he said earnestly. "I have thought it over carefully. I must marry sometime; we are all agreed on that."

"Of course. But I had always hoped you would marry for love."

He took her hand. "My perfect mama. But I cannot be like you in every way."

She snatched her hand back. "This is not a jest," she said hotly.

"I'm sorry. Your love for my father is legendary. But I must make my own legend some other way."

Sophia was not mollified. "And the girl? Are her feelings to be considered?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I assume her feelings are that she will like being Duchess Tremontaine some day, and having beautiful houses to live in and parties to give. That is what the world knows being my wife entails."

"You sound as though you despise her already," Sophia said grimly.

He looked at her in surprise. "I don't despise her. I quite like her. She is pretty and has a nice laugh."

"Oh, dear."

Theron got up to pace, reeling off his points as though he were in a classroom debate. "After all, what is a noble marriage? I grant you the obvious: we must find each other attractive. Which we do." He blushed faintly. "But how much of our time will be spent alone in each other's company? Awake? Precious little. Most of our days will be full of our individual work and occupations. I'll have my seat in Council, which I do intend to take up, eventually. There will be meetings, dinners—which she will arrange. Highcombe, and the other estates. And, of course, my studies; I won't let everything go. She will have her own amusements; doubtless her tastes are already formed, and I won't interfere: cards, gowns, music, sewing, friends, whatever she likes.

"What I really need her for is to take care of *people*. I'm tired of having to know everyone, of endless parties and connections. It wears me out just thinking about it! Genevieve knows them all already, knows their consequence and their place. She has a quick understanding of how things work, and I need that." His voice was getting shrill, his movements agitated. "I cannot keep it all in my head —I've more important things to think about—"

"Theron," his mother interrupted. "You need not be duke, if the thought of it is such a burden to you."

He stopped in mid-stride. "But you have always intended me to be. You and Cousin Katherine; it's quite obvious. You chose to stay in the city to raise me to it. You promised my father. And now that I've figured out a way to make it work, you balk and want to talk about love." He lifted his head haughtily. "I do think, madam, that it—"

She said, "Ah, I see I have come down in the world."

"What?" he demanded.

"First I was 'mama,' then 'Sophia,' but now I have descended all the way to 'madam.'"

"I'm sorry." Abruptly he curled up in a miserable heap at her side. "I am just trying to explain. No one seems to understand."

"Well, I will try. Why don't you tell me about it?"

He tried, he really tried, to explain just how difficult it was, trying to live up to everyone's expectations. "Cousin Katherine wants a politician," he said at last. "My noble peers want a sportsman, you want a loving, faithful husband. You all want me to be like you. I can see the good in all these things, so I'm doing my best, but it's hard."

Sophia took his face in her hands and searched it with dark serious eyes. "And you, my son. What is it you would like to be?"

He looked away. "Left alone. That's why I want to marry Genevieve. She will give me time, room to discover who I am when I'm not trying to please my family."

Hurt, she released him. "So you marry her to please me?"

"I marry her to do my duty by my family. That should please you anyway," he said petulantly. "You're always talking about duty and responsibility."

"Am I?" Sophia smiled sadly. "And from this you have learned to marry a young woman you do not love so that she may shield you from the demands of your position? I have not taught well, my son, or you have not listened."

"That's not fair, Mama," he said, sounding very like the child who had been told he might not hit the twins back because they were girls. "You *like* teaching surgery and bringing women into University and taking care of beggars."

"That is not the point. It is there to be done, and I have the knowledge and the money to do it. That is the point."

"Oh, Mama." There was a world of affection as well as impatience in Theron's exclamation. He made as if to rise, but Sophia restrained him.

"You say you want this girl to take care of the demands of society on you. But are you quite certain she is able to? She is just out of the schoolroom, almost a

child, far younger than you. How do you think she will be able to do what you yourself cannot?"

"Because she has been bred to it, as I have not," he snapped; then, appalled, he put his hand over his mouth and shook his head. "I don't mean to find fault, Mama. Forgive me. But…you don't know these people as I do. It's what they learn, these girls: how to run a household, how to get on in society. It's all they teach them, really; it's what their 'schoolroom' lessons consist of. Her mother's a knowing one; if Genevieve has any problems, she can just ask her. It will be fine."

"One more question, my dear. What about the man you stay with at University—the young doctor?"

"Basil," Theron murmured. "Basil St Cloud. I will continue to go to him. I love him."

Sophia made a helpless gesture. "Then why do you marry this Randall? Surely you may live with whomever you please and adopt an heir as Katherine has done."

"Cousin Katherine is a law to herself," he said. "That's not what I want. I want to be like everyone else—to have a proper house, a proper wife. Basil doesn't signify: half the married nobility on the Hill have lovers. Look at Lord Condell and David Tyrone! Their wives don't care—they have lovers of their own; Condell's wife has been with Flavia Montague since they were girls. It's a time-honored custom. Everyone does it. My father did it."

"Your father," said Sophia gently, "was also a law to himself. And when he had lovers, he had no wife. After he married, he was absolutely faithful—not because he was too old and ill to stray, but because he did not wish to."

"Mama—"

"Hush. You have been honest with me; I can be no less. You are my son. I love you even when I do not understand you. It is right and natural that you have opinions that differ from mine. But I would be a poor mother indeed if I did not tell you that this marriage to Genevieve Randall is a terrible mistake. You know nothing of what marriage is, or can be. I am afraid that you will be very unhappy—both of you. I hope that you will change your mind."

She spoke gently and sadly, and when she had finished, she rose from the chair in which she had sat at her husband's bedside, kissed her son on the brow, and went to bed.

chapter VI

BASIL ST CLOUD GREW USED TO THE CONSTANT company of his inner circle of students—"your bodyguard," as Rugg called them, only half joking. Basil's students closed ranks around him whenever he appeared in public. Paradoxically, the more they were with him, the less they demanded of him. It was as if, having become a Cause, Basil was relieved of the petty need to actually say anything or engage with anyone. When he or they were not in the Archives, Basil grew used to sitting in the Blackbird's Nest, half-listening to his students' joking and arguing with one another. Their voices turned to a comfortable music while he thought about whatever was preoccupying him at the moment: where Theron was, or what Crabbe was reading right now; whether a connection could reasonably be drawn between the Wizard Guidry as described in Hollis, and the "Guidry" mentioned in a pre-Union heroic stanza; a nasty remark Crabbe had made at a historians' dinner five years back. Most dangerously, he thought about the Book.

He was making progress. He'd applied everything he knew of scholarship to the Book of the King's Wizard: the rules of rhetoric, logic, analysis. His students had found things, too, that helped more than they knew. Sometimes, deep in the night, he imagined himself on the brink of discovery, of comprehension, of mastery. And imagining this, it was a short step to imagining himself standing before Roger Crabbe, casting a spell from the Book, casting it successfully, and Crabbe's face turning purple when Basil succeeded. Delicious as that image was, he shouldn't even think of it. He knew better than to try any of the spells. He had not the training for such things. Best stick to what he was already master of, and that was scholarship.

Anthony Lindley's voice cut through his musings. "Of course it's important, Godwin, you idiot. Everything's important, when there's so little to go on." Basil focused on the boy and smiled. He was more Northern than the Northerners these days, tricked out in braids and an oak leaf, spouting obscure Northern folklore as to the manner born. He'd always been a dedicated student, but his research was showing flashes of true brilliance. It was a pity he'd been so ill at the

beginning of the term. He still looked unwell—too thin and excitable. Basil knew there'd been something between Lindley and the dour-faced Northerner who'd once been amongst his most fervent students.

"What ever happened to Finn?" Basil asked the table at large.

Frozen in mid-conversation, four startled faces looked up at him.

"Finn?" Peter Godwin repeated stupidly.

"Yes," said Basil. "Alaric Finn, our resident expert on Northern customs and traditions. Last I saw of him was right before MidWinter break. He hasn't changed disciplines, has he?"

"No." Lindley wore a curious look on his face. "That he did not change."

"Not that I'd blame him," Basil hastened to say. "Ancient history's no path to a decent living—you all know that, don't you?" Dumbly, they nodded. Afraid he'd offended them or seemed to be complaining about his income (which they paid, after all), he added quickly, "And I really thought Finn had the feel for it. Perhaps he had trouble with his fees. There's many a promising man has been forced to abandon his studies for lack of funds." Basil looked at their uncomfortable faces, then down at the beer-ringed tabletop. "You know I'd never refuse knowledge to anyone just for the want of a few coins. You'll come to me if you have problems, won't you?"

"He went home!" blurted Henry Fremont. Even patient Justis Blake looked at him oddly. "Finn, I mean. His family, or something."

"Ah." Basil nodded. "I'd like to go North myself, someday. It's strange to have read so much and never seen the forests of Redding or Guidry's Well. Which I suppose," he said, rising, "is my cue to go back to work, so I can earn my way there."

His students were never so glad to see him go.

But at the door to Minchin Street, Basil met Theron come to look for him—and all thoughts of any glory but the present were put aside. They lost themselves in a trance of sensation and release that lasted all the afternoon. When Basil knew where he was again, the room was dark, his throat was raw with shouting, and his body heavy and stiff with drying sweat.

"I hate to say this," said Theron from beneath him, "but I'm thirsty."

Basil groaned.

"Cold, too," Theron went on. "And I can't breathe."

Basil grunted and rolled away from his lover's body, groaning again as the chill air hit his sweat-matted chest. The mattress shifted as Theron got up; more cold air signaled that he'd taken the sheet with him. A moment later came the scrape and sizzle of a lucifer; candlelight banished the shadows to the corners and

revealed Theron kneeling by the hearth, building a fire. He was wrapped in the sheet, his hair in his face. Basil's heart contracted painfully: that beauty, that passion, that power belonged to him, to him alone, to use and to enjoy. The time was coming to release it to the Land, to sow new life in the woods and fields.

He rose and put his hands on Theron's shoulders. "The time approaches," he said.

"Are you worrying about the debate?" Theron asked.

Basil stroked his lover's hair. "The debate?" He had to think for a moment. "Oh. No, I wasn't thinking about that." He tipped Theron's head back, ran his palm down his throat.

Theron shook him off briskly. "Not now, Basil. Look at you—you're half-mad with hunger. What you need is food. And a drink." He scrambled to his feet and began to look for his clothes.

Basil wrapped himself in Theron's abandoned sheet. "Perhaps," he said doubtfully.

"And lights. And people to distract you. We'll even go to the Nest," he offered magnanimously, but Basil put his hands over his face.

"No! God, no! My students will be there."

"All right, all right." Theron pulled his lover's hands away. "Come with me to Riverside."

All Basil's dreams of power and passion dissipated before an utterly mundane and unscholarly anxiety. "I won't get killed?" he asked, only half teasing.

Theron smiled. "Not if you're with me, you won't. I'm the Prince of Riverside."

"In that case…" Basil laughed.

Theron was pulling on his breeches and his linen shirt. "I'll take you to a place I know." He thrust a bundle of clothes into Basil's hands. "Here, get dressed. No, not in your robe—leave it off, just wear your jacket. There's no scholars where we're going! This place is small and quiet, with very good whiskey. After, when you've cheered up, we can go round the corner to where there's dancing."

Alarmed, Basil said, "I don't dance."

"You don't have to," Theron said indulgently. "But it's fun to watch. Lights. Music. Very engaging."

"Lead on."

In nearly ten years in the city, Basil had never crossed the Bridge over to Riverside. Why should he? The district had nothing that he needed—except old trunks of books buried amidst the ruins of its tattered townhouses, and the trunks Foster Rag-and-Bone had brought to him. He felt immensely bold, walking arm in arm with his lover, their hats pulled low over their faces against

discovery and the biting wind. They went along the University side of the river, then past the Council Hall, where lights still burned.

"You walk this way every day," Basil said, unexpectedly moved.

"Pretty much." Theron pulled Basil closer. "Here's the Bridge. It's old—maybe even pre-Union. They never widened it for carriages, just foot- and cart-traffic." They stopped for a moment, considering the stones. Then Theron raised their torch, and raised his other arm, inviting: "Shall we?"

And they crossed the water onto the island.

Basil felt Theron change, or thought he did. He was like a farmer who's just crossed onto his father's land—which, in a way, was it exactly. His step was sure, navigating them down streets and around potholes it was too dark for Basil to see. He gestured and pointed to places where things had happened to him involving people with strange nicknames, until Basil was dizzy with his history.

They ducked as they went down narrow stairs to a tavern in a cellar, dark and warm, that seemed to expand forever underground.

"Hey there, Liz!" Theron greeted the proprietor.

She lifted her hand to her bosom. "It's him! Back from the dead!" He raised his eyebrows, and she explained, "I heard love put a spike through your heart while you were getting your portrait painted."

"Old news," Theron said curtly, "and very stale. Almost as stale as that pie you serve. But I've brought my new friend, and told him you have good stuff here. Don't make a liar of me, eh?"

"You want the oak cask?"

"Of course I want the oak cask."

The whiskey that came from it was rich and fiery. Basil blinked tears from his eyes. His lover grinned. "Better? This is the real thing—Northern firewater, straight from the mountain streams."

"Is there anything," the magister asked quizzically, "you haven't tried?"

"Nothing that's any good"—Basil smelled the spirits on his breath as Theron leaned forward—"that I wouldn't share with you." In the tavern, there, they kissed, and Basil nearly swooned with the heat and the fumes and pride and embarrassment and disbelief that this was really happening to him.

"Tremontaine!" a voice near their ears whispered.

Theron's hand went to his knife. But when he saw who it was, he only said, "Louie, what is it? Can't you see I'm busy?"

A ferret-faced young man with one ear missing said, "Yeah, but—how busy is busy? I've got a new shipment in, see. You get first pick."

"Not interested."

"You'll pay twice as much—three times—on Lassiter's Row, I'm telling you."

"I know." Theron beamed. "But I've got a new friend," he squeezed Basil playfully, "and I'm spending all my allowance on him. He likes books, though, not emeralds; right, my sweet?"

Basil looked from the radiant prince to the shadowy dealer. "If you want to buy me a stolen emerald, I'm not stopping you."

"Hush," said Theron, over Louie's protest of, "Stolen? Who said stolen? What sort of trash you bringing in here, T?"

"Aw, Louie…" Theron fished out some coins from his waistband. "Get us all another round, will you?" Then he murmured to Basil, "Bad form, my dear. They're as touchy as first-years defending their mothers. Certain words do not get used."

Louie came back with the drinks, and Basil had to listen to the young men reminiscing about a series of fights they'd once been in with kids from other streets. He wondered how Theron had found time for all these exploits while attending so many classes as a boy. It must have been before he'd moved on from street fighting to taking all those lovers, that was it. You found time for all sorts of other amusements when your life didn't depend on your studies…but, no, he wasn't going to think about Crabbe and the debate. Basil knocked back the last of his whiskey and concentrated on the conversation.

"You still see much of Nora?" Theron asked.

"Nora with three kids and a dockworker husband?" snorted Louie. "Not if I see her first. You should come round more often, T, you're missing what's new around here. I'll save you something special. You still like a hit of smoke now and then?"

"Ah, no." Theron grimaced helplessly at Basil. "I was only doing that because of…"

"Say no more. Well, I'll let you get back to your books!" And Louie passed on to another acquaintance who might, perhaps, like a deal.

"Well!" Theron said brightly. "That was entertaining."

Basil said, "At least now I understand something you said once. That first night we had together? You said you weren't really a dutiful son. I've always thought you were, though, despite it all. But now I see that it is my good influence—my very good influence—that has kept you from all sorts of mischief. When are you going to introduce me to your mother?"

"When you need a goiter excised, and not a moment before. Come on, let's move on."

"To the dancing? I'm not sure I'm ready for that. Buy me another whiskey."

"Sensible man." Theron kissed his brow and waved to the barmaid. "You are a very good influence."

THEY COULD HEAR THE MUSIC ALL THE WAY DOWN THE street, pouring out of a hall that was as bright as the other had been dark. Basil's feet were not quite steady, probably because Theron was hanging on his neck, breathing fumes and kisses into his mouth. Basil started to worry about whether anyone on the street would see him staggering and laughing with a beautiful student; then he remembered that they were in Riverside, not on the streets of University, and that what he did here was no one's business. The music was even louder when they opened the door, meeting the hot blast of people sweating, the reek of spilled beer, and a cacophony of fiddle and pipe and drum.

Theron held out his arms. "Dance with me!"

Basil knew all of the steps from village fairs: simple swings and stamps and twirls. But it seemed so ridiculous to him. "Ah, no. Let's have some more to drink."

"I don't want to drink; I want to dance!"

"Well, you can't. Not with me."

"With someone else, then?" Foxily, Theron eyed the crowd. "How do you like that redhead with the huge knockers? Think she'd be fun to hold? Or the boy with the unconvincing mustache—if it's a boy at all—you never know, down here."

Basil's fingers dug into his arm. "If you dance, you dance with me."

"But you won't!" Theron complained. He bounced on his toes to the beat. "And I've got the music in me, now! If you won't do it, find me someone who can. Look at them all. Come on, Basil, let's play the Wizard Game! Pick me out someone to hold—a partner for the night—"

"How dare you!" Basil flung him away, miraculously missing the people in the tight-packed room.

"What? How dare I what?"

"Don't make a mock of me!"

"Of your wizards, you mean, and their peculiar fancies? Don't you think it would be fun? I wouldn't do anything, only dance—"

"How dare you make a game of it? I study truth and share it with you, and you —"

"I know what you do! Do you think I don't listen to what you're always talking about? Do you think I'm stupid, Basil?"

"I think you're spoiled. I think you presume. I'm not some sort of toy—"

"You are my toy as much as I am yours in this!"

"Love is a game to you, then?"

"Not love, no, but our bodies—like a dance—"

"I said I don't dance! You heard me; you just don't like it when I don't leap to dance to whatever tune you happen to be playing."

"Well, then." Theron looked at him haughtily. "Why don't you just run on back to your scratchy paper mistress?"

"I'm not your servant." Basil heard his voice, hot as his face and hands. "If I go, it's only to spare myself the shame of being seen with you."

"Ashamed to be seen with the Prince of Riverside?" Theron was frostily amused. "Then shall I ask one of my loyal subjects to see you safely home?"

Heat was replaced by chill. "Don't bother, my lord. I think that I can find the river from here. And if one of your *subjects* wants the few coppers I have in my purse, I will gladly give them." He made Theron a stiff bow, and stalked to the entrance and out into the night, scarcely noticing how his set face and clenched hands cleared a path through the revelers.

Theron watched this exhibition. As the door slammed shut, he shook his head, as if coming out of a trance. He was moved to follow his lover and beg his pardon. They'd both had too much to drink.

As he hesitated, he noticed a stocky young man standing by the door, looking around as if lost. His face was a little too sweet, and Theron wondered if he knew just where he was. He looked like he might be wanting the Apricot, instead. It was a chance, Theron thought, to be helpful. Basil would take a deal of soothing and coaxing before he'd be ready to make up the quarrel. And suddenly Theron was tired to death of soothing and coaxing and ministering to the tender pride of a mayor's son who lusted after dead kings.

He snagged two beers from a server and approached the young man.

"How kind." The stranger's voice was a pleasant tenor, younger than the lines around his eyes.

"I wonder," Theron asked politely, "if you were looking for anything particular in here."

"In fact, I was." The man gestured to the dais where the band played. "There's a singer I came to hear. I work on the river; we don't get much chance for such things."

"Oh, a riverman! Now that's something I've always wanted to know about."

"Have you?" The stranger's eyes were amused. "Well, it's mostly hauling freight and watching the banks go by. Oh, there we go!"

The singer had come on, a tall red-headed woman in a tight dress. Theron recognized her: "the Sizzler," they called her, for a number of reasons, not least of all the peculiar hissing purr in her voice, which lent a certain punch to even the most innocuous of lyrics. He had been a big fan of hers when she first appeared a few years back, had even tried his hand at writing her some verses. Now the Sizzler sang an extremely clever song about the city's lack of charity, and then a risqué one about a shopgirl setting terms with a noble who wanted to sleep with her. Theron clapped and shouted with the rest of the crowd, but he kept his eyes on the riverman. Who kept his eyes on the singer. And when she'd finished her set, the Sizzler made a beeline for them, encircling the riverman in her scented arms. Over her shoulder she said to Theron, "And you, young Tremontaine, you can just keep your hands off my Felix!"

Theron said stiffly, "I hope I may buy someone a drink without being accused of assault."

"I know you," the singer continued, unmollified. "And if you make any more scenes in here, I'll write you some songs will make you wish you'd never been born—aye, and sing 'em, too, where plenty of folk can hear them. How would you like to have your latest folly cried all over town?"

"Now, Sally." The riverman was grinning. "I can protect my virtue without your help."

"That's as may be," said the singer. "I know this one, Felix, and you'd better watch out. Go with anyone, he will, with no thought in the world save his own pleasure. Last I heard, some painter woman was leading him about by a ring through his nose. Ready to die of love for her, they say, though I take leave to doubt it. And now a blind man may see he's making that handsome young man's life a misery. So you just leave my Felix alone, do you hear?"

Theron felt his face grow hot, and hoped it didn't show. *Leading him about by a ring through his nose*. It was not how he would have described his affair with Ysaud. But he could just imagine the song it would make.

"When I start chasing rivermen," he said stiffly, "I'll make sure Felix is not on my list. Fine as he is."

The woman looked at him, and then, disconcertingly, began to laugh. "You *don't* much care, do you? Well, if a river*man* is what you're after, Felix won't give you much joy!"

"Spitfire," said Felix lovingly. She quirked her mouth at Tremontaine. "Don't stare. 'Tisn't manners."

Now that Theron knew she was a woman, he could see that she was not as young as he'd thought; well over thirty, certainly. Handsome, both for a woman

and a man, and as easy in her man's clothes as Katherine.

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly.

"No need. My Sal put you out a moment since; consider the honors even." She turned back to the singer, and the two of them moved on to the dance floor.

Nonplussed, Theron drained his beer and thought of going on to the Brown Dog to dice or to the Apricot, or even home to a full night's rest for once. But the singer's words had stung him more than he'd admit. He thought of Basil, hurt and angry in his shadowy room, imagining his lover in the muscular arms of a young riverman, or worse. How he'll laugh, Theron thought, when he finds out the truth! Almost without conscious decision, he struck out for the Bridge, his boot-heels ringing over the cobbles, his breath steaming as he hummed the Sizzler's last chorus.

HENRY FREMONT WAS MODERATELY PLEASED WITH himself. The act of notifying the Northern contingent of Alaric Finn's death had gone far to lull his pangs of conscience. He still could not entirely justify his letters to Lord Nicholas, but he was inclined to be proud of his reparations for his misdeeds. He'd given away the leather pouch and fancy jacket he'd bought with the money Galing had paid him. He couldn't bring himself to part with the books, but he vowed he'd lend them to anyone who asked, and he'd given most of his ready cash, as well as his new muffler and a blanket, to Lindley. He'd even walked all the way out of the city to the Nag's Head to make sure the Northerners had gotten his message. They had —or at least the body had disappeared from the shed and a purse containing two silvers been left in its place. And he was working for the magister day and night, wizard-hunting in the Archives. Henry still had nightmares—only to be expected, he thought, after such a shock—but on the whole, he thought he'd brushed through the incident pretty well.

So it was with a quiet heart that Henry sat in his room one night, candle lit, book open, catching up on the reading for Doctor Rugg's course, which he'd fallen behind on. When he heard a knock at the door, his first thought was that it must be Blake, come to tempt him away to the Nest. Well, Blake could knock his knuckles raw; tonight, Henry meant to be virtuous.

"Bugger off!" he shouted, when the knocking renewed. "I'm busy. I'm sleeping. I'm not in."

The latch rattled, and the door opened. Henry turned in his chair to blast Blake for disturbing him, but it wasn't Blake. It wasn't anyone he knew, although he'd seen him at the Nest, or someone very like him. As tall and nearly as thin as

Henry himself, his visitor wore his long hair in dozens of tiny braids down his back, and his face was as bleak as a week of rain.

Henry swallowed sudden nausea and cleared his throat. "I don't believe I know you," he said weakly.

"But I know you," said the Northerner. "You are Henry Fremont, of the College of Humane Sciences." His Northern accent was thicker than Finn's, but Henry could not miss the irony of his tone. "You are also, by your own calling, a friend. I have come to see whether you are a friend of Alaric Finn's, or a friend of ours."

Feeling very much at a disadvantage, Henry stood up and tried to get a grip on the situation. "I don't know that I was, strictly speaking, a *friend* of Finn's—more a colleague, really, but we won't fuss over terms. I don't know who you are—apart from being Northern, of course—and I don't know anything about Northerners—apart from the ancient variety—so it would be foolhardy of me to call myself your friend, in the personal sense, anyway."

"Enough," said the Northerner. "If you are not our friend, you are our enemy. And therefore I have this to say to you, Henry Fremont. The Land has been deprived too long of blood and honor. It thirsts, Henry Fremont; it hungers. It needs a king again to feed it properly. Until that day comes, it will accept whatever sacrifices it may come by—even the poor, thin blood of such a Southron fool as you."

Henry listened to this speech with mounting indignation, and by the time the Northerner had come to his ringing conclusion, he was almost as angry as he was afraid. "That puts me in my place, doesn't it? Well, let me tell you something, Master King's Companion. It's not too bright of you to go around threatening people who might, if you'd keep your mouth shut, be more sympathetic to whatever you're up to. I'm an ancient historian, you idiot. I know the Northern kings weren't barbarians, and I know that their Companions were much more than a bunch of drunken, rutting, strutting thugs."

The Northerner looked amused. "Do you call me a thug, Southron?"

"If the hat fits—or should I say, the leaf? You're really something, with your little secret society and your badges and your silly, girlish braids. If I'd known how you were going to behave, I'd have left Finn to rot in the grove, as Lindley wanted us to, and be damned to the lot of you."

Henry stopped, appalled at what he'd said, waiting for the Northerner to draw the long knife gleaming at his belt. But the braided man just stared at him silently, mouth stern, pale eyes slitted. "Yes," he said finally. "That would have

been best. You know nothing. You understand nothing. You are no threat to us. But take good care, Henry Fremont. Ignorance is not always innocence."

He did not close the door after himself.

chapter VII

AS THE DAYS AND WEEKS WORE ON TOWARD SPRING, the first stray tepid breezes brought a tentative thaw to the land. In the oak grove and in the gardens of the Hill, snowdrops showed their heads above the damp ground. In the city streets, gelatinous mud sucked at the boots of the rich, worked its way into the shoes of the poor, and caked upon the floors of taverns, shops, council chambers, and tenements. There was an outbreak of ague among the mathematicians, and a big-bellied mercer's daughter brought suit in City Sessions against a Fellow of Astronomy who she swore had promised to marry her. The Council of Lords was much concerned with the unrest in the North, and how to bring the Duke of Hartsholt to a better sense of his duties without setting a precedent that might threaten their own power some day.

Basil St Cloud did not notice the weather. Sunk deep in his studies, he hardly knew whether it was day or night. His lectures and Theron were the only punctuation in days spent prying the secrets of the past from the papers and books his students brought him.

Basil was beginning to believe that he had been mistaken in his theories of the Northern kings. The more he read, the more evidence he found suggesting that the oldest kings, the Northern kings, had indeed been a little mad. The way the wizards spoke of them, the deeds they did of battle and of love; the way they knew things and the way they heedlessly sacrificed themselves…these were not the sane and reasoned acts that Basil admired in their successors. Since several

sources suggested that it was the wizards who controlled that madness, it then followed that the union of the wizards and kings must be critical to the prosperity of the Land. So much was clear. What was less clear was why the Northern kings had been mad in the first place. Had the wizards chosen only madmen as their Little Kings? Or had they deliberately driven sane men to madness? The evidence pointed that way: a Little King was wholly under the tutelage of a single wizard from the time he was chosen until he stood his trial. But why? No source that Basil could find would say.

And then the kings rode south. If the wizards ruled the kings either by choosing madmen or driving them mad, it followed that once the kings began to marry women and to father heirs who were not chosen by wizards, the ruling family would begin to grow sane at last. Look at Laurent, Peregrine, and of course Anselm the Wise, the greatest of them all, who formally curtailed the wizards' power over the throne and its workings. But by this reasoning, Anselm's heirs should have continued to grow, if not wiser and saner, then certainly no madder than their fathers. Which was abundantly not the case.

After Anselm, the place of the wizards in the royal court became less well-defined. Wizards came and went in the royal households of Anselm's heirs as advisors, as spiritual guides, as supernatural guards, finally as spies and inquisitors; as everything, in fact, but tutors to the king's children or mentors to the king's heir, as they had once been.

That was something, but was it enough to account for the great decline that took place over the hundred years between Anselm the Wise and his Wizard Querenel to Iron Tybald and his flock of sadistic wizardly councilors? There had to be something else as well. Was it something to do with the book of spells and the lost language, or the shift of the Wizard's College from North to South? Were the wizards spreading themselves too thin, caring for the two lands at once, when the roots of their magic lay in the North? Or could it be that, with Anselm, the king had sundered the old bond between them by refusing to let his son take a wizard as his lover?

It galled Basil that he had no documentary answers to these questions, but he knew enough to form some theories, and his instincts told him that his theories were near the truth. Whether the kings liked it or not, their fates were entwined with the wizards. When the kings withdrew from the control of the wizards, they began to lose control over themselves; when the wizards lost their traditional purpose, they also began to lose their wisdom and their abilities. In the end, the very last kings—Iron Tybald, Hilary the Stag, and finally Gerard—turned to the wizards again, to strengthen them, to heal them, to protect them from a realm

that had grown to hate them. But it was too late. Guidry's Book survived, but the key to unlock its wisdom had been irrevocably lost. So the kings were mad again, the wizards useless…The nobles had been right: there was nothing left to do but wipe out the whole boiling of them, kings and wizards both, and start over again.

It made perfect sense. If only he could find enough concrete proof, even the Governors would have to accept his reasoning. So Basil applied himself to sifting studiously through the flotsam and jetsam of ancient history. But studying ancient history meant studying power and ancient kings, meant studying the Book of the King's Wizard, meant studying Theron. Meant pinning Theron to the mattress, meant touching the Book when he touched his flesh, touching flesh when he touched the Book. Almost impossible these days to unknit the strands that bound them all together. And all of them seemed to be leading him to some great conclusion, a final knowledge that would not only defeat Crabbe but change all of history as it had been studied. Spending time on anything else was almost unbearable. Every moment spent away from his books or his lover was a sojourn in a trackless waste.

His books were faithful enough, but Theron was increasingly occupied with lectures, with family gatherings, with various appointments on vague matters of business too dull to tell his lover about. It was not remarkable for him to appear an hour or even two after his promised time, penitent, affectionate, and eager.

Which was why Basil was sitting in the Blackbird's Nest one foggy afternoon when he should have been working. As they'd kissed and parted that morning. Theron had said that he would come to the Nest at noon for a bite and a word before Doctor Tipton's rhetoric lecture. "I'll buy you a beer," he'd said. "We'll sit and talk. We haven't talked properly for ages."

NOON CAME AND WENT. BASIL, COLLECTING A BATCH of notes from Blake and Godwin, hardly noticed how the time passed until they left for their afternoon lectures and he realized that Theron was still not there. He had half a mind to leave himself, let Theron learn his lover had better things to do than cool his heels waiting for a thoughtless boy to remember him. But the Archives were dank and smelled of mildew and mold, and the Nest was warm and bright, and the mulled ale he was drinking was fragrant with hops and cloves. He ordered another, and was still waiting for it when Theron arrived, breathless, on the tolling of the University bell. He was two hours late.

Theron flung himself onto the nearest bench. "Sorry! Beer? No, wait—it's two already—I must get to Tipton's rhetoric—"

"Theron, what is that you're wearing?"

The young noble's black robe was open over a pair of tight-fitting striped yellow breeches and an embroidered waistcoat. He looked ruefully down at his splendor. "Sorry—had to go see the lawyer this morning, no time to change—"

Basil laughed. "Well, cover them up, and maybe no one will laugh at you. Lawyer, eh? Nothing's wrong, I hope?"

"Oh, no. I think it will all be fine. Thanks, Basil, I'm off—"

"Wait." The black whirlwind froze. "Tell me if you're coming to Minchin Street tonight." There was a note of command in his voice that brought a speculative smile to Theron's lips.

"Will you be there?"

"Will you?" Basil insisted.

"There's a party," Theron began apologetically.

"There have been other parties. I'll be up late."

Theron looked his lover full in the eyes, then nodded. "Yes," he said. "I will come."

THERON TOLD HIMSELF HE WAS NOT NERVOUS. THE difficult part had all been done: the contracts, the lawyers with their endless talk of rights and property, duty and dowries. Marcus and his aides had handled the bulk of it, but the family (in this case, Sophia, Katherine, and Marcus all united) had agreed that it would be good for Theron to attend some of the negotiations himself, so that he had a true understanding of what was at stake. It had been hard for him to pay attention. He could not bring himself to care about the fine points of income from land he'd never seen, or which pieces of the family jewelry his wife would be entitled to wear. His thoughts kept straying to Basil, hot in bed and cool at his desk, rising this morning from the papers he was examining as Theron dressed to kiss him again and again as though setting his seal on him until next they met. The lawyers with their endless arguments had made him late, but he'd gotten away in time to meet Basil at the Nest before Tipton's lecture. After all, Theron was there to observe, not to negotiate; he had perfect faith that his people would not let the Randalls get one brass minnow more than was their due.

But tonight was different. Tonight he was on his own, with business only he could take care of. He dressed in green the color of his eyes, with starched white linen at his neck and wrists. He put rings on his fingers, a diamond at his throat.

He went to the ball where all had agreed that he would ask Genevieve Randall to marry him.

He found her sitting with a group of girlfriends, including Charlie Talbert's fiancée, Lady Elizabeth Horn. Ever since Theron's pursuit of Genevieve had become known, the Talbert cousins and their circle had made a point of befriending the pretty Randall girl. He supposed once he was married they would all be coming to the house. Genevieve could entertain them; she seemed happy in their company. When they saw Theron, Lady Elizabeth nudged her. Genevieve looked up, her clear face lit with a smile. The other girls shifted their billowing skirts to let him approach her, and he held out his hand across the sea of flounces that remained. He marveled, as always, at how light and tiny her bones were. Tonight, her hand was cold.

He said, "Will you dance?", noting that it took her a moment to acquiesce. Then he drew her away from the crowded ballroom, leaving the girls to whisper with delight.

"Oh!" Genevieve looked back at the brightly lit room, as he led her into the shadows of a quiet corridor. He had never been alone with her before; it had never been permitted. But no one came after her. He turned her, and it was like a dance, so that she was facing him, her back to the wall. He did not let go her hand, and he felt it warming in his grasp.

"You look beautiful," he said. "I thought so the very first time I saw you."

She smiled. "I remember. It was at the Lassiters' ball. I was wearing my willow cream silk, and I was afraid it made me look sallow."

"No. You had your hair up very high." With great care, he reached out his hand and touched one lock of hair over her ear and raised it up. "Your ears were exposed, just like this, and I wanted to kiss them."

"Kiss my ears?"

He showed her. She stiffened when she felt his lips, and then she laughed, and then she leaned into his arms. Her ears were pierced, hung with huge pearl drops. He sucked one into his mouth, tasting her and smelling her at once. He made a noise in the back of his throat, and her tiny fingers gripped the cloth of his jacket. He worked his tongue around her earlobe, feeling the pearl clatter against his teeth. She clung to him harder.

He had never kissed a noble girl before. She smelt of powder and perfume, gold wire and silk and her own sharp sweet sweat. The tops of her breasts glowed like twin moons pushing out of her gown, held there in perpetual temptation by her corset. He kissed her parted lips, and then he pulled away.

"I think," he said, "if we were married, we would"—he paused for breath —"we would enjoy one another."

Her mouth quirked gently. "Would you eat *all* my jewelry?"

He said, "Perhaps. Will you marry me?"

"Everyone wants me to."

"I want you to."

"Well then, I will. Yes."

"Yes?" He looked into her eyes, where his mother told him the truth resides. She looked back at him, bright and clear and young. Theron nodded. He took a ruby ring from his finger. "This is mine," he said, "and my family's." He slid it over her forefinger, where it was still too large. "You keep it. Wear it for me."

Shyly, she kissed his finger where the ring had been. "I will like being married to you," she said, keeping her eyes on his hands.

"I hope so."

"They tell me you are wild," she confided to his hands, "but I don't think so."

"It's true. I am wild, or I have been."

"Oh," she said, glancing up swiftly. "I don't mind. That is—it sounds as if you've had an exciting life."

He smoothed his thumb over her fingers. "I will try to make you happy," he heard himself say, just like a bad romance.

She looked into his eyes, her face aglow. "When we are married," she said, and he said, "Yes?"

"When we are married, there is one thing I would like."

"What is it?"

"I was thinking…" She dropped her eyes and blushed. He waited. "I was wondering, perhaps, if I might see your hair unbound."

Swiftly he raised his hand and undid the clasp. His long hair came tumbling down around his shoulders, down his back, a smoky waterfall. Like a child who cannot resist a sweet, she reached for it, tangled her fingers in the silky mass. "Oh," she cried. "How I would love to brush it!"

He almost laughed. Instead he said, "Well, help me gather it back up, or I will start behaving as if we are already married, and I in told contracts have been broken over less."

It felt good, the way she ran her hands through his hair, smoothing it out, neatening him up, her fingers fumbling at the clasp in the dark for a moment before it closed.

"Don't lose the ring," he said. "Your parents have to see that you've accepted it from me, and then they can announce our engagement."

"I know," she said; "it's next week. The Montague banquet, Mama thought, because everyone will be there."

"Next week? Why not tonight?"

"It isn't proper. They always wait a few days before the formal announcement, in case—well, to give people time to get used to it, I suppose."

"Or in case you want to change your mind?"

"Or you change yours," she said.

"I wouldn't dare. My lawyers would have me killed."

To his surprise, she looked alarmed. "Is there trouble? With my dowry?"

He said gently, "If there were, I wouldn't be here now, no matter how beautiful your ears."

But everyone must have known, and the announcement would be a mere formality, for the heir to Tremontaine danced with the Randalls' daughter three times that night, and three times more, and the other girls flirted ferociously with him, now that he was safely bound, while their sweethearts and brothers welcomed him as one of themselves at last, drinking with him so deeply that he forgot all about a promise he had made to a man on Minchin Street.

BASIL WOKE AS DAWN WAS SILVERING THE CITY. He was slumped over his table, cramped and cold and weary. He was aware of a sullen rage burning in him like a banked fire, and the unwelcome fact that he had a lecture to give. He pulled together his notes, jammed a hat on his head, and stopped by the Nest for something hot on his way to LeClerc.

His lecture that morning was more discursive than usual, its subject being the fabled wizard Guidry. A forest of legends and stories had grown up around the name, obscuring everything but the undeniable fact that a wizard named Guidry had served every king of the North from Simon Thunderer to Alexander Ravenhair, spanning some two hundred years.

"Later historians have assumed," St Cloud said, "that the original Guidry, Simon's Guidry, founded a dynasty of wizards who shared their master's name as they shared his statecraft and magical pre-eminence. But there's an earlier source. You will remember that Hollis mentions a *True Chronicle of the Wizards and Their Deeds*, written before the Union by one Martindale. The *True Chronicle* was very popular in the early years of the Union and was among the first books to be printed. Bits of it are quoted by Hollis and Placid, but Fleming states absolutely that no copies survived the Fall. Now I have found one, and very interesting it proves to be."

Massed on their benches, St Cloud's inner circle turned to each other with mouths agape. Who had managed to turn that treasure up? And why hadn't he claimed his victory? But Blake and Vandeleur and Fremont and Godwin and Lindley all looked equally astonished. Basil saw no need to tell them that the gift had come from Theron Campion, a penitent Theron, making up with him after the Riverside debacle.

"I found it at home," Theron had said, "propping up a table leg, can you believe it?"

Basil believed it more likely that the boy had taken it from the Riverside library, but he had been too thrilled to do anything but thank him and kiss him for his gift. Now that Theron had failed him again, he wondered if he could expect another such find. He wondered if it was worth it.

"According to Martindale," Basil continued his lecture, "Guidry lived two hundred years without growing old. The description is a striking one." Basil referred to his notes. "'Tall as a bear, and thick of neck and thigh like unto a forest tree was the Wizard Guidry; hair and leaves grew upon him close, ancient in wisdom and love of the Land. Power ran in his seed and strength in his hand, and whatsoever Little King he chose, that one endured his trial and survived to be chained with gold and give his blood and bone to the Land.'" Basil looked up. "Martindale's style is colorful, of course. Hollis did not scruple to call his predecessor 'a golden-tongued rogue,' which Delgardie and his crew took as evidence that Martindale, who saw at least one wizard Guidry with his own eyes, was a liar.

"Now. As we know from our copious dealings with the gentleman, Delgardie's definition of a liar was simply someone who did not see the world as he himself saw it. So what are we to make of Martindale's assertion that after two hundred years choosing and guiding the kings of the North, Guidry did not die, but hid himself away in a magical grove where he would sleep until the Land was in need of him?"

Here St Cloud paused, as if waiting for an answer, savoring the attention of his acolytes. They were a good group, strong-hearted and devoted to the truth, to the Land, and to him. One of the most promising, young Lindley, stood and said, "That it is a great mystery, magister, and like all mysteries, both true and beautiful. I would that I might live to see his return."

The laughter began even before he finished this quaint speech, breaking the spell that had begun to gather. Basil laughed as heartily as any before saying, "It is a mystery, Lindley, but I suspect Martindale has taken poetic license in this passage to signify that Guidry's magic will live forever, perhaps in the lost Book of

the King's Wizard. Which teaches us something about poetic license and about the ephemeral nature of books."

All in all, it was an exhilarating morning, but an exhausting one, after a long and fruitless night. Afterward, Basil was of two minds whether to return to his books, or accompany his students to the Nest and spin out the heady feeling of power that buoyed him. He was still trying to decide when he came out of LeClerc, surrounded by his informal guard: Blake, Vandeleur, Fremont, Lindley, Godwin. An unlikely group, he found himself thinking—more townsmen than countrymen, but passionate, each in his way, and ambitious. They would have made good wizards, in a different time and place.

"Watch out there," Vandeleur snapped.

"What shall I watch for?" a lazy voice drawled. "The Lord High Doctor of Scholarship? I'll step aside for none less, University boy."

Basil came to himself with a shock, saw Vandeleur and Blake confronting a small group of young men with cropped hair and lace at their throats—nobles out slumming.

"Lay off, Perry," said one of them. "Won't find out anything if we don't ask politely."

The young man made a scornful gesture and stepped aside; St Cloud and his entourage moved forward, only to be blocked by another of the group—a sturdy young man, square-faced and flushed above his foaming lace. "Beg pardon," he said. "I'm looking for a teacher, and I thought—well, are you Doctor St Cloud? My mother wants—that is, I'm so interested in—in the kings and all. I'm Clarence Randall, by the way. My father's Lord Randall. A Northern title, you know." He stuck out beringed fingers, seized the magister's hand, and pumped vigorously.

St Cloud merely looked at him, and at their joined hands, which Randall was still pumping. Randall, oblivious, chattered on. "I've wanted to attend your lectures ever since I heard about the challenge. Felt shy about looking you up, not being used to University ways. But here you are, dropped out of the sky. So. May I come?"

Several thoughts went through Basil's head at once. He loathed cocky, stupid, presumptuous young puppies like Clarence Randall; his challenge was making him known beyond the University, just as Rugg and Cassius and Elton had said it would; he was in no position to send young Randall off with a flea in his ear.

"Lord Clarence," he said, temporizing. "I don't know if you realize the term is almost over. You'd be plunging into deep waters indeed, were you to begin your studies now. Still, if you read my *Origins of Peace*, you will have the bare bones of

it. If you want to know more, you are free to come to me next fall, when I will begin a new course of lectures."

"*The Origins of Peace*, you said?" Randall turned to his friend. "Remember that, will you, Perry?"

Perry laughed. "Remember it yourself. Whence the sudden interest in ancient history, Randall? I'd have thought cards and drinking more your line."

Randall turned positively crimson. "Oh, it's some notion of my mother's."

"Ah," said Perry. "I see. Then you'd best ask Campion to remember it for you. He's interested in history, too, and he's practically a member of the family, eh, Campion?"

It was only then that St Cloud realized that Theron had joined the gaudy crowd, a crow among peacocks in his black scholar's robe. As Perry spoke, Basil caught his lover's gaze past Randall's head. Theron's green eyes shifted, veiled themselves under the heavy oval lids. He put his arm around young Randall's broad shoulders. "I'll remember anything you like, my dear," he said, "as long as I don't have to do it in the middle of the street." And he led the boy away.

Simple bewilderment rooted Basil to the spot, followed close by rage. Someone was repeating his name; Justis Blake. St Cloud shook him off impatiently and strode off toward Minchin Street. A dry, soft breeze ruffled his hair. Winter had masked itself as spring today. There'd be another frost—there always was—to slick the streets with ice and blast the early crocuses. But true spring was not so far behind, bringing the end of the term and the Festival of Sowing and his meeting with Roger Crabbe upon the Great Hall steps. He'd been wasting his time on dalliance while his honor hung in the balance. Well, he'd dally no longer.

Back at Minchin Street, Basil sharpened his pens and mixed fresh ink and prepared to marshal his arguments concerning the wizards and the reality of their magic. He knew just what he had to say, and how, but he wrote and crossed out sentence after sentence, wrote and crumpled page after page, until at last he found himself sitting amongst a snowdrift of spoiled sheets, plagued by the memory of Theron's face turning from him. He knew that Theron was hiding something important. Confronted, Theron would undoubtedly lie about it, try to charm or kiss his way out of an explanation. Basil thought he could bear anything better than Theron's false protestations of love and innocence.

But what could he do? He was no nobleman, to command Theron's obedience. He was no dockside bully, to beat the truth out of him. He was powerless, he had nothing—

Basil stared at the mess of papers spread out on the desk before him. He felt as if the words were laughing at him, giggling like schoolchildren as they hid and revealed themselves amongst the crumpled pages of notes and transcriptions. *Truth*, they read, and *wizards* and *spell* and *If Ye wold* and *If Ye Dare*…

He went to the bed and dug out the battered document box, and lifted out the wizards' book. He turned to A *Spelle for the Uncovring of Hidden Trothe*. He mouthed the strange words through, and then began again at the beginning, aloud.

Having begun, he could not stop, though the mysterious syllables clashed and slid in his mouth like rough pebbles. His voice rang strangely in his ears, and the meaning of what he read crouched half-seen at the edges of his understanding. When he came to an end, he was dizzy, and his pulse thundered in his ears. The countryman in him half expected to see his candle burning black, and shapeless shadows seething in the corner behind the fire. But his room looked as it always had: homely, cluttered, shabby, prosaic. Basil rubbed shaking hands over his face, then wiped them dry on his robe before touching the Book again. He'd done it wrong, that was all. Perhaps he should try again.

The door opened behind him. "I've been having the most excruciating evening," Theron announced. "I've been conversing with debutantes, flattering dowagers, and listening to politically minded nobles discourse upon taxes. Comfort me, my dear, before I explode from an excess of respectability."

He wore full ball-dress. His hair was oiled and pulled back into a glossy club held by a jeweled clip. Rings weighed down his hands and a pearl hung from the lobe of one ear. He was flushed and a little unsteady. He held out a hand to Basil, who ignored it.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" Theron asked plaintively.

Basil laid the book on the table. "I did not expect you tonight. I was working. You interrupted me."

"You've never minded being interrupted before." Theron closed the door and stepped into the room, stripping off his cloak and tossing it into a corner. "And you won't mind it this time, either." He came up behind Basil and put his arms around his chest. He smelled sweet and complicated, of perfumed oil and wine and desire. He leaned over Basil's shoulder and rubbed his face like a great cat. The pearl in his ear brushed Basil's cheek, smooth and hard as glass.

The pearl seared Basil's flesh like a torch, ice and fire at once. Basil shook Theron off. "That earring is a woman's jewel," he said, knowing as he spoke that it was true. "She gave it to you tonight, from her own ear as you begged it."

The flushed face turned pale. "Nonsense, Basil."

"Nonsense, indeed. Do you think I don't know you?"

"No." Theron stared back at him with glittering eyes. "You don't. You don't know me at all."

Basil breathed in deeply. It seemed to him that he could smell Theron's every emotion as clearly as he could smell the woman he'd been with. "It does not become you, my lord, to lie. Not to me."

Now two spots of color, like red bites, stained his lover's cheeks. "Because I am a lord? Or because you are so fond of truth?"

"Both," said Basil calmly. "And more besides. You, with the blood of kings, and I with—what I have. Now, come here," He held out his hand as if coaxing an animal from the woods. "Come here and tell me about your latest conquest."

Theron started back violently, the pearl swinging against his cheek. "No! Dammit, no! You have no right—"

"Theron, I have every right," Basil said in the same sweet, reasoning voice. "You are mine. You have said so a hundred times. Did you think it was just a bed-game?"

The young nobleman drew himself up proudly. "You presume on my love."

"Yes," Basil answered. "I do. Oaths have been made, and pledges spoken. Seed has been spilt. What's done cannot be undone."

Theron was staring at him with a kind of horror. "You speak as though you really think you own me."

"You are mine, Theron. And you have betrayed me. I know that, too." Basil laughed ruefully. "You told me once you wanted to make a study of me. But you are no scholar, remember? It is I, my dear, who've made a study of you. And I know what I know."

"What do you know?" Theron hissed, his fists clenched. "You understand nothing of the world beyond these walls. All you know of love is what I taught you! Study me?" he sneered. "How could you do that—when all you see when you look at me is the mask of one of your dead kings?

"You never wanted me at all—you wanted Anselm the Wise, or Francis the Brave, or Alexander Ravenhair—but they've moldered to dust in a wood somewhere, so you had to make do with what turned up and reminded you of them. You don't see *me* at all, do you?" He was shouting, but his arms were wrapped tightly around himself. "You don't see me, you don't know me, you don't know who I really am! I tried to tell you, over and over, but you ignored everything that didn't fit your history books! Whatever you loved, Basil, it wasn't me—and I was a fool to love you."

Basil listened in silence. The words should have cut deep, but they did not. He heard instead how Theron's misery was a form of love, how it was he who was breaking the young man's heart. The knowledge of his power worked in him like desire, potent and delicious. He had never known a joy quite like this, fierce and dark with the knowledge of just where he might inflict the most pain. He had not known Theron could be hurt like this.

"I do love you," Basil said with steady truth. "I love you and I know you. The land will have what that land will have, Theron. 'A man proud and willful and arrogant. And loving and passionate, with the gift to make men love him, and women, too.' Yes, it's Hollis on King Alexander—and it is you to the life. And always will be. Ask anyone."

Theron's hand was on the latch.

"You're running away, now," Basil said. "That, too, is who you are. But you will not run forever. Sooner or later you will stand and face your trial." It was all coming together; all the little hints and clues contained in his papers and books, pieces of a pattern as inevitable as it was compelling. "Be careful to know yourself when the time comes," he warned the Little King. "The man who fails the test will run for the rest of his life, with the beast still in his heart."

Theron said nothing. He flung open the door, and slammed it behind him. Basil heard his feet clattering down the stairs.

He had left his cloak in the corner of the room. Basil picked it up and inhaled the scent of him. Power was sweet, as sweet as knowledge. Together, they were mastery and achievement. Doctor Basil St Cloud lifted the Book of the King's Wizard from the table where it had lain all the while, and carefully folded the cloak around it, until it was wrapped in layer after layer of his lover's rich garment. He put them both under his pillow, and lay down to dream.

chapter VIII

By the time Lord Arlen finally sent for him, Galing had reached a state of high frustration. His servants had caught the brunt of his temper, to the extent that his manservant would have given notice, if he hadn't been sure that Lord Nicholas would get over it eventually, just as he always did.

Galing's irascibility was not to be wondered at. In his own mind, he was absolutely sure that the Tremontaine heir was involved in some plot. Henry's reports, Ysaud's paintings, his own conversations with Campion, all pointed toward a man of unusual arrogance and romantic ideas, a man who could easily be flattered into accepting a crown. All Nicholas needed was the weight of the Serpent's authority behind him, and he'd soon know who was planning to win that crown for him. He had written to tell Arlen that he had something important to report; he'd even sent a note to Edward. And Arlen had left him hanging for weeks. It was all he could do, when the summons came, not to Wing it back in the messenger's face.

Accustomed by now to Arlen's ways, Galing endured the opening pleasantries of the interview, answering inquiries about his mother's health and which swordsman he intended to back at the exhibition rights with what grace he could muster. Arlen never came straight to the point. Very well, Galing wouldn't either; but as the discussion of swordsmen dragged on, he grew increasingly impatient. Perhaps Arlen was leaving the opening move up to him. In any case, he could wait no longer. "I've been seeing something of Theron Campion," he said slyly. "An original young man."

"Is he?" Arlen drawled. "I find him quite conventionally ill-behaved. Unsuitable lovers, low interests, carousing: what's so original about that?"

It was now, Galing thought, or not at all. "I was thinking more of treason."

"Were you?"

The fire crackled. Lord Arlen sipped his wine and gazed into the flames, offering Galing ample opportunity to study his hawk's profile. Nicholas felt put-upon. Did Arlen want a report or not? Everything's a test, Edward had reminded

him last autumn when all this started. A test of what? Patience? Persistence? The ability to have two conversations at once?

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly. "I thought you summoned me to discuss a possible royalist plot in the city. If you prefer to gossip about swordsmen and waistcoats, I am, of course, at your disposal."

"Treason is a serious charge, Galing," said Arlen. "I presume you have some solid reason for making it?"

Nicholas unpacked his notes and laid what he knew and what he'd guessed before the Serpent Chancellor. Arlen listened gravely, looked at the papers Galing handed him, asked a question or two, and when he was done, said, "I must congratulate you, Galing. You have the makings of an excellent intelligencer, can you but curb your impulse to reason in advance of your data. All this"—he tapped the sheaf of papers lying on his knee—"is very interesting, very useful. Thank you. You need do no more."

Galing was too good a card-player to show surprise, but his temper took a moment to subdue. When he thought he could trust himself not to say anything that might jeopardize his future career, he ventured, "It is good to hear that the matter of the Northern rebellion has been resolved so quickly."

"Not resolved, precisely; simply confined to the North. My agents are investigating the activities of the society calling itself, rather incautiously, the Companions of the King. Thanks to you, the leaders of the University branch—Masters Greenleaf and Smith—are safely out of harm's way. As to the Northern branch—well, my agent currently describes it as an association of young men, young and unmarried, who gather in the woods from time to time to celebrate elaborate rituals that draw equally from local folklore and a youthful taste for mysticism and indiscriminate copulation. We're watching them closely."

"And the trouble up North?"

Arlen shrugged. "As I think I said this autumn, the Northern farmers are always unhappy. They are unhappier than usual just now, but steps are being taken to cheer them. You are not to trouble your head over them."

"What about Campion?" Voices are harder to control than expressions. Nicholas heard a pleading note creep into his tone and clenched his hand in vexation.

Arlen didn't seem to notice. "Campion is to wed Lord Randall's daughter in the fall, and will take his bride to the Kyrillian Archipelago on a diplomatic embassy to the Parliaments."

"But Ysaud's paintings…"

"Mean nothing. Madam Ysaud is a well-known eccentric, with no more interest in politics than my cat. My dear Galing, you haven't got a case. Outside of the Last Night incident, there is no connection between Theron Campion and the Companions of the King or indeed any other faction, political or otherwise. What that leaves us with is a cause without a focus and a focus without a cause—in short, with nothing." He nodded kindly at Galing, who was dumb with fury. "Your concern does you credit, Galing, but I assure you, there's nothing in it."

"I don't believe that," Galing said.

Lord Arlen's lids descended in a slow blink: he was getting annoyed. "The matter is closed," he said. "There is no evidence."

"There's lots of evidence," Galing insisted. "There's the Hunt, and the fact that Campion led it to the oak grove; there's his relationship with St Cloud, who seems hell-bent on proving the wizards weren't frauds."

"Those incidents are not evidence," Arlen said coldly. "They are coincidence magnified to significance through the lens of ambition. Where is young Campion's army? Where are his allies? When would he have planned all this? And with whom? As I understand it, you are suggesting that Theron Campion is somehow destined to restore the monarchy. Under the circumstances, to believe in such an eventuality one would have to believe in magic." Arlen paused. "Have you come across anything in your studies, Lord Nicholas, to convince you that magic actually exists?"

"Of course not," Galing answered promptly. It would have been foolish to give any other answer to Arlen's question, even though he'd begun to wonder privately whether there might not once have been something very like magic practiced in the courts of the ancient kings. But his private reflections, he thought, were not Arlen's concern. Nor were any questions he might think to ask or friendships he might choose to foster in pursuing his own private ends. Which included, just now, putting a definitive stop to whatever Theron Campion might be up to. "You're perfectly right, Lord Arlen," he went on smoothly. "I do beg your pardon. It's—well, disappointing to spend so much time on something and see it all come to nothing."

"Of every twenty paths an intelligencer explores, only one or two will lead to a clear destination," Arlen said kindly. "You must shrug and go on to the next project."

Galing looked up eagerly, "I will, sir. Gladly. And what is the next project?"

"Gently, gently," said Arlen, smiling. "I have nothing in hand just now calling for your special talents. Go home, attend to your affairs, forget all this tedious

ancient history. And leave young Campion alone, eh? He's too highly placed to be hounded to no purpose."

"Of course," Nicholas murmured, falsely submissive. "And St Cloud?"

"Let St Cloud's own words dig his grave." Arlen leaned forward, caught Galing's eyes and held them with his predator's steady gaze. "Let it be, Nicholas. And if you cannot, tread carefully. I would hate to lose such a promising ally."

Galing nodded, rose, made his farewells, and left Lord Aden's house. He had no intention of letting it be. And he would not tread carefully. The best way to cross thin ice is not to feel your way, but to run lightly and quickly to the other side. It wouldn't do to pursue the boy; he'd wait and see if Campion showed up for his theatre party. If he didn't, well, his absence would provide Nicholas with a good excuse to call. The hunt was up, the quarry running. Soon enough, he'd bring him to bay.

TWO DAYS AFTER HIS QUARREL WITH THERON, BASIL was in a pitiable state of nerves. He had cast a magic spell from the forbidden book and it had revealed truths to him that, on reflection, he'd prefer not to have known. Or perhaps common sense had revealed them, and Theron's own behavior, which had been very odd of late, and that was not magic at all, only delusion and coincidence. And then there were the dreams, vivid as life, which he could not remember when he woke, save for disconnected images of men with pelts and dainty cloven hooves, of his own hands turning to brown-furred paws, of a bright pool of water and oak and holly and a bone-handled knife. He felt restless, uncomfortable, out of joint, as though his skin were not his own. He could not work.

There were two possible explanations for all this. Either he was growing as mad as the kings had been, or else he was in sober truth becoming a wizard. The impression that his thoughts and words were not entirely his was very like madness, certainly. But it had all been true, hadn't it, what he and Theron had said to each other? Theron had never admitted that the pearl had come from a woman; but neither had he denied it.

Madman or wizard? Basil wasn't sure which explanation frightened him more. And there was no way of knowing which Was the more likely without seeing Theron again. Their encounter had been so strange, limned by jealousy and colored with rage, that it seemed more like a painting or a play he had watched than a conversation in which he had taken part. Talking to Theron would at least make it seem concrete, palpable, subject to discussion. He would even apologize, if he had to.

But would Theron speak to him? Or was he too angry? Had all their winter's loving pleasure been undone by one evening?

If it had been only the quarrel, Basil might have waited Theron out a little longer. But there was the Book, and his dreams, and Basil needed to know, finally, whether he was mad or not. So he went out in search of his lover, beginning with the places where rhetoricians were known to gather.

No one had seen Campion at the Ink Pot or the Blasted Vine or the Bramble Bush. Basil ducked into the Gilded Cockatrice, where the noble students liked to drink overpriced claret.

The Gilded Cockatrice was a large, high-windowed room above a bookseller's; an ancient presence-hall, perhaps, or a petty court, its ceiling carved with strange beasts and half-human creatures holding up the mantel over the great hearth. It was always a noisy place, but today the noise was deafening: at the other end of the room, noble students were knocking back drinks and toasting something, which seemed to involve jumping up on a table. Basil looked around. He didn't see Theron, but Cassius, of all people, was sitting near the door with a glass of ruby wine in front of him.

Basil accosted him. "What are you doing here, Cassius? I thought you hated this place."

"I was invited for a drink," Cassius said shortly. "What's your excuse? You should be home working on that challenge!"

"I'm looking for Lord Theron Campion," Basil said tersely. "Is he in here?"

"Not anymore," Cassius said. "He left—that is, he's probably at the Nest. Hurry up, you just might catch him—"

A voice raised itself above the general roar: "I've got one, I've got one! To Campion: Netted at last—may we all be spared the same sad fate!"

"Well said, Perry! Man deserves better. How about this? To Campion: May his bride's maidenhead prove as tight as his lover's arsehole!"

There was a brief, shocked silence. "Hemmynge, you fool," said someone.

Basil surveyed the crowd: faces turned up to Kim or down to their cups and tankards, flushed, pale, round, hollow-cheeked, waiting for him to react.

"Idiots," Cassius muttered, taking Basil's arm. "Never mind, old fellow, let's go —"

"It is traditional," said Basil, raising his voice to lecture-room pitch, "to toast a man on the occasion of his betrothal." He took the cup from Cassius's lax hand and lifted it to the room. "To Lord Alexander Theron Campion of Tremontaine. May his dedication to his name and his lineage prove true and just." He put the cup to his lips and drained the excellent red wine to the dregs.

Silent bewilderment greeted his toast, breaking into murmurs that followed him as he turned on his heel and strode down the steps and out into a bright, cold afternoon. Basil felt no anger as he walked through the narrow streets, just a slow bleeding away of mind and spirit that could only be stanched by the sight of Theron Campion on his knees before him.

IF HE WEREN'T BUSY WITH THE DETAILS OF GETTING married, Theron thought, he would go mad. Anything to distract him from what had happened between him and Basil! He could not believe what he had heard himself say. The words had come out of his mouth without his thought, without his foreknowledge, as though he were reading lines fresh-written, still wet with ink.

The worst thing was, he knew that they were true. He and Basil had loved each other, yes, but as shadows love one another, each yearning toward a shape that was cast by something real, yet never looking beyond the shadow's form. The year he'd studied metaphysics, he'd read about something like that. All his study, though, all his reading and thinking and discussing—all these years of work, and where had it left him? The same fool he would have been if he'd spent them learning surgery, or dog-breeding, or how to tell the difference between goose-turd green and peapod green taffeta! He'd learned nothing that did him any good. He fell in love and gave his heart and felt safe, and then he found out that he'd gotten it all wrong. Furthermore, everyone around him had known all along that he'd gotten it wrong and were only waiting to tell him. Though he still wasn't sure how he had failed this time. Basil had been everything that anyone could wish for in a lover: beautiful, brilliant, devoted…

Fortunately, Theron mused, this time would be his last. He would marry Lady Genevieve, and maybe he'd be faithful to her after all. God knows he wanted her right now. Her inexperience only meant that they could spend a long time working on the basics. She struck him as a quick learner. Once she got the hang of things, he did not imagine that they would soon tire of one another. The fact that he did not love her yet probably counted in her favor. Probably, he could only have a decent life with someone he was not foolish enough to fall in love with from the start.

The engagement had been formally announced at the ball where Genevieve had given him her earring. The wedding was set for autumn; it was too late to plan a spring wedding, and everyone would be in the country during the summer. He would probably go to the country, too. The city was always rife with fever in the summer, and it wouldn't do to have him die before his nuptials. He thought

he'd go to one of the Tremontaine estates, maybe with the twins and their babies. Di and Is could spend the warm months giving him pointers on how to be married; they'd enjoy that. He would certainly not go to Highcombe, even though all the people there who'd known him since he was a sickly baby would want to congratulate him on his betrothal. He would not risk running into Basil's terrible father, the cock of the Highcombe walk.

Theron was now a welcome visitor at the Randalls'; indeed, it turned out he was supposed to be paying visits almost every day or it would be remarked on. He wished that he could go to the country right now; the number of things that turned out to be expected of him were a little bit more than he had bargained for. His Talbert cousins were giving a dinner for the newly betrothed couple, and Katherine was making him go over a list of invitations to distant relatives. She was even sending announcements to Jessica, wherever in the world she might be, in hopes that she might arrive home by the fall. He wondered what on earth Ysaud thought of the whole thing; surely she had heard.

And Basil? Did Basil know? Someone must have told him, by now. He wished that he had been able to tell him himself. It would have been hard, but at least he would have been able to explain that it was not in despite of their love, but rather, in a weird way, because of it. Perhaps he should write to him. Perhaps he should not. He still had classes to go to. But he would avoid the Blackbird's Nest. Tony Lindley and that crew would be thrilled.

The dreams were back, too; he knew they were the same ones, though this time he was not himself at all. It was as if the dreams no longer bothered to draw him to themselves; instead, they had a part for him and he walked into it. He was a man with braided hair strung with beads and bells. Other men, his brothers, watched him from the shadows of the leaves as he walked toward that same damned grove. He was very much afraid, and it was important that he let no one know it. He wanted what was there, although he did not know what it was. It was like an itch in the part of the back you cannot reach. It was like trying to remember the thing that would save your life.

BASIL SAT IN HIS ROOMS ON MINCHIN STREET. HIS door was locked and his worktable was bare of everything but a single, fat, leather-covered book. Basil laid his hand upon the oak leaf stamped into the cover. It was time.

He was very calm. Theron had betrayed him. That was unimportant: lovers betrayed one another. Kings had even betrayed their wizards—often, if there were any truth in his researches at all. Alexander Ravenhair had betrayed the

great wizard Guidry by falling in love with Rosamund of Brightwater and wanting to marry her. But the wizards always managed to bring their kings to heel in the end, even if the end, like Alexander's, was death.

The problem, of course, was that Theron was not yet king. Basil had pieced it all together over the long winter nights, a phrase here and a hint there, with the commentary on the spells to help give it all context. He'd started something at MidWinter, lying with Theron when he'd returned from the Hunt, and now the time had come to take the next step. Imprisoned in the city, lost in a labyrinth of stone and mortar and dry, dead wood, he had no connection to the Living Land as the Northern wizards had before him. But he had his dreams and he had his learning, and the ability to analyze data and reason from premise to conclusion. He'd reasoned long and hard, and he had concluded that he and Theron had come together because they had been brought together: by fate, by magic, by the Land that desired, after all these centuries, a wizard and a king to serve it.

Sudden tears blurred Basil's sight. It was too much. He was unworthy, unprepared, untaught. He would never understand the words of the spells he cast, never be a true power-master like Guidry, whose own hand had inscribed the words he studied, or even Pretorius or Ranulph, though their power had been weakened by the South. But his study, his devotion, had taught him what the spells meant and why, deep down in his bones and blood where mere words had no meaning. By some process past his understanding, Basil had become a wizard, and worthy or not, it was his duty, his holy obligation, to set the young king to his trial and bind him at last to the Land.

The Spelle of the Great Tryal was long and complex. Basil read it through once and again, emptying his mind of thought and emotion, filling it with images of green leaves and running waters, of a young man with long dark hair and a stag leaping like a breaking wave through the forest branches.

The third time, he read it aloud.

THERON WAS ON THE HILL, IN THE RANDALLS' GILDED drawing room. He had brought Genevieve a book of colored prints of flowers, since she had said that she liked gardens. Also a book of poetry, since she'd asked him about some he'd quoted to her in a letter. She'd had the ring he'd given her sized to fit her hand. It was one of the Tremontaine rubies, and looked a bit garish on her because her bones were so small and red was not really her color. But it was important that she wear it throughout the engagement. He might, perhaps, have chosen more

thoughtfully, but he'd been raised with tales of the ducal family rubies and they meant something to him.

Lady Randall had sent Genevieve to fetch an embroidered cushion that she was almost certain depicted the same flower as one in the book (though Theron knew Genevieve well enough by now to tell that, despite her docile acquiescence, she was sure it did not); meanwhile Lady Randall was discussing the benefits to one's health of drinking vinegar, something he had often heard his mother deride as a fad of the overfed rich. He was being charming and agreeing with her, because he'd found he had no choice—and anyway, what did it matter? It was almost funny. Genevieve brought the pillow, but it was nothing like, and her mother sent her back across the room to look again.

Then Theron smelled green leaves and running water, although the windows were closed and the Randalls' house far from the river. The scent was so strong, he lifted his head and gave a small cry.

The next thing he knew, he had fallen to his knees.

"My dear, what is it?" Lady Randall stood over him, trying to reach beyond her corsets to help him to his feet. Theron's body felt heavy; his sex was a weight between his legs. For once, he had no words to answer. Lady Genevieve hurried to his side in a rustle of skirts.

"No!" he cried hoarsely, arm upraised to fend her off. "Don't—"

The girl's scent filled his nostrils. He tried to stumble to his feet, but his hands still sought the safety of the floor. Her flurried petticoats were attacking him with sharp rustling sounds like something coming at him through the underbrush. The scent of woman overpowered him. He wanted to run toward the scent, but away from the sounds.

He flung up his head and found his balance. "I must go," he gasped. "Please, let me go—"

They were speaking, but he could not understand them. He ran, kicking aside the presents he had brought her, to get to the window, the fresh air. He fumbled with the latch, got it open, and breathed deep. It was the way out. He took it: stumbling over the sill and out through the garden, head high, nostrils flared to catch the scent of danger, running.

THERON NEVER REALLY REMEMBERED FINDING HIS WAY home to Riverside. It took a long time; he slid from shadow to shadow, afraid to let himself be seen. He moved by scent, away from the gardens and perfume, past the treacherous shops and soapy houses and bitter bloody tanneries, to the clear swift scent of the river

and the stone that spanned it, crossing the river to the streets his feet knew in the dark. Night had fallen. Riversiders slipped through the streets to do their arcane business in the city: thieves and cutpurses, whores and rogues of all stripes. They walked past his still and breathing form without even seeing him. At the small, private door of his house he paused, stroking the wood, smelling its oaken grain and the iron that bound it. He peeled his clothing off as he went up the stairs. His own odor of fear and exertion rose to his nostrils; he fell asleep wrapped in the scent and heat of his own body.

Theron woke just at dawn, alert to the singing of the birds. The sky was cool and gray. There was a thirst raging in him so fierce that he poured cold water into his washbasin and drank from it. He pulled on a loose robe and found pen and paper.

"Dear Lady Randall," he wrote, "My behavior yesterday was inexcusable to anyone, but doubly so to one I esteem so highly. Nonetheless I pray you will excuse me more gracefully than I excused myself, and even find it in you to praise me for my swift withdrawal from your fair company, since I was overcome by a malady which, had I stayed, would have inconvenienced everyone." He smiled; he wasn't a rhetorician for nothing. Rereading his letter, he found that he barely recognized the hand. The letters were awkward, ill-shaped. Frowning, Theron rang for Terence. He was famished; he'd had no supper the night before.

"Breakfast," Theron commanded. "Whatever there is, but quickly."

He went back to his letter, a fresh sheet of paper, forming the letters carefully like a penman's exercise: hooks and pots and circles and swirls…and found that what he had made was a series of spirals, like a maze. He cast it into the embers; it was flaring brightly when Terence came in with a tray. "Sausages, my lord." The smell filled the room like blood and death. Theron gagged, and reached his washbasin in time to vomit violently into it.

He dictated his note of apology to his mother's secretary; in return, the Randalls sent him a basket of hothouse grapes, which he ate with gratitude. His mother took his pulse, and looked at his tongue and under his eyelids. His pulse, she said, was tumultuous. She did not generally believe in bleeding, but he was so hectic that she thought it might do good and help him back to an appetite. Theron wanted to tell her that he would eat as many fruits and salads as anyone cared to bring him, only meat and cheese revolted him; but he felt simultaneously agitated and listless, reluctant to speak. Sophia sent for her bowl and her lancet; they arrived on a tray, covered by a white napkin. "Hold out your arm, my love," she said, and he did. The steel lifted, flashing bright and sharp, and he gave a full-throated scream that the whole house heard. Sophia stood

very still. “Theron,” she said softly. He was pressed against the far wall, half twisted in a curtain.

“No,” he begged, “no, don’t cut me, no—”

She soothed him back to himself, and made him a very strong posset, and stood over him while he drank it all down and fell asleep. In his dreams, he was running, always running—and he woke with his muscles aching in unaccustomed places.

BASIL ST CLOUD UTTERED THE LAST OF THE HEAVY, edged words of the ancient spell and fell silent. The air rang around him, as if lightning had just struck nearby, and sparkling rainbows danced in his vision as the echo of his spell faded into the ancient walls.

He found he was standing in the middle of the floor with the Book in his hands. He did not remember rising from his desk. A trembling took his legs and hands, and he hastily sank onto the bed. He was not entirely sure, now, what he had done, or even if it had been entirely he who had done it. The power that had risen in him, had it been his or the Book’s, or even Guidry’s sleeping in those oddly supple pages until his desire woke it? He couldn’t think about it just now, with his head afire. Slowly he closed the Book. And then he slept.

The next day’s dawning found Basil St Cloud stretched fully dressed across his unmade bed. He woke with a burning thirst and a sense that the ground had been overnight cut from beneath his feet. He remembered that Theron had betrayed him. And he remembered that he had cast another spell on him.

The book lay by his hand. He opened it to *The Spelle of the Tryal Royalle. By the whyche the True Kynge may be Knowne, or Loose Hymself in the Wode*. He did not remember, now, exactly why he had chosen that spell, or what effect it could be expected to have. It was madness to have cast it. And what had he to show for it? Limbs as weak as damp cloth and a headache like the rumbling of carts and no proof that the spell had worked, or even the possibility of such proof. Unless Theron died, he thought dismally. Or somehow showed himself to be the king.

Whatever his spell-casting may or may not have done, whether he himself were mad or sane, certain things remained unchanged. Theron had abandoned him for the comforts of a noble marriage with his own kind. There was Roger Crabbe to face in a month’s time and all the Governors and Doctors of the University to persuade that magic was, or had been, real. And lectures to give and students to train in the pursuit of truth.

Slowly as an old man, Basil St Cloud rose and brushed down his clothes and rinsed his mouth with the rusty water from the yard pump and went out in search of breakfast.

GENEVIEVE RANDALL WROTE TO LORD THERON EVERY day, little bulletins about her new perroquet, or the sculpture-viewing party he had missed, or the plans for her wedding dress and her attendants. The world she inhabited seemed small and serene; a nice, safe place to be. When at last Theron felt himself well enough to go out, he dressed with care and set out for the Hill.

Riverside was alive with sharp-bladed sunlight and the buffeting scents of fresh air. Every flash of light caught his eye and made him jump: sun on a windowpane, the ornament on someone's hat, even a speck of mica embedded in stone startled him as he went by. But he was determined to go on. When at last he achieved the Tremontaine stables across the Bridge, he sank into the recesses of his carriage with relief and kept the leather curtains down until they'd reached the Hill.

Lady Randall and her daughter were at home, as they usually were at this hour. Lady Randall, splendid in mole-colored satin, held out a plump hand to him. She smelled of some heavy, floral scent with civet in it. Teeth clenched against nausea, Theron touched her hand to his lips, then turned to Genevieve. There was a faint crease between her blue eyes; her rosy mouth was grave. She exclaimed over his pallor, wondered whether he was quite recovered.

Listening to the high, soft voices, Theron felt as if he'd entered a different world: the colors of their sitting room were so bright, so pure; the smells of dried roses and beeswax so unlike the wood smoke and spice of the Riverside house. They offered him chocolate to drink, but all he wanted was water.

"Such a temperate young man," Lady Randall joked approvingly. "Or is it, my lord, that you'd prefer something stronger?"

Theron sipped the water gratefully. It tasted of metal, very different from the stone well at home. "No, thank you. This is very good."

She rose, businesslike and cheerful. "If you are quite comfortable," she said, "I've been meaning to have a word with the housekeeper. I'm sure Genevieve will be glad to entertain you."

He had brought his betrothed a little token: a dove carved from tourmaline. It fit into the palm of his hand; he drew it from his bosom and held it out to Genevieve, to show her how soft it lay there. She made a pretty noise, jumping up in a rustle of taffeta, and bent over his hand to look more closely. He felt her

breath on his upturned fingers. A wisp of her dark, feathery hair stroked his wrist. Theron gasped, and clenched his fingers on the bird. She laughed, and pulled at them with her own fluttery fingertips. He could taste the smell of her on his tongue, suffusing his mouth. His breath came in panting gulps, his body prickled with sweat, and he began to tremble with the strength of his desire. He knew it was not yet time to touch her, but he had forgotten exactly why.

"Show me the bird," she laughed. "Theron, give it me!"

"I'll show you," he said hoarsely. "Give me your hand—" And he drew it down to his desire, and closed his eyes. She tugged against his grip, whimpering.

The door opened, and they sprang apart.

Lady Randall took in the sight of their faces and said, "Are you well, Lord Theron? You look quite flushed. Please, sit down. More water?" He heard the tone of her voice, like boiling sugar syrup, more than he understood the words. He put his nose in the glass of water, smelling it deeply to bring himself to coolness and stillness, and drank.

"Lord Theron brought me a bird, Mama," said Genevieve, much too brightly.

"That was very kind of him. Not a live one, I hope!"

"No," Theron said. "It's made of stone." Carefully he opened his hand. The carving was washed in sweat. He wiped it with his handkerchief, and put it on the table.

"What a sweet man you are," said Lady Randall, "to come up here so soon after your illness with such a nice token. It's what the poet says, isn't it? 'Two birds in one nest, is always the best.'" He forced his eyes away from the twin doves of her plump breasts, rising above her tight, brown bodice. "But I do think it is important for you not to tire yourself. Genevieve, have you thanked Lord Theron for his gift?"

She darted a glance at him, a flash of blue like a bird folding its wings. "Thank you," she whispered. "I will cherish it."

Theron's carriage was sent for, and once again he drew the leather curtains so that he could have privacy for his needs. As the wheels jolted over the cobblestones of the city, he dreamed in a haze of woodland glades and soft-breasted birds and delicious, undying pleasure.

As the door closed on Lord Theron, Lady Randall turned to her daughter, who was staring at the little dove with something like loathing. Lady Randall took a deep breath and began: "My love. Now that you're betrothed…"

Genevieve began to weep in the overwrought, gusty way her mother particularly disliked. Lady Randall cast her eyes to heaven. "Genevieve! Stop that at once. It's all very well to be sensitive and high-strung, but not if you're going to carry on over a kiss like a serving-girl."

"He didn't kiss me," Genevieve sobbed. "I wanted him to kiss me."

"Well." Extracting a lace handkerchief from her tight sleeve, Lady Randall gave it to her daughter, and silently cursed randy young bucks who couldn't wait until the wedding feast was over before drinking the bridal cup. She had not planned to have this discussion for weeks yet. When Genevieve had reached the sniffling and mopping stage, Lady Randall said, "I won't ask you what he did—you're perfectly all right, after all, and you *are* betrothed. If he frightened you, I blame myself entirely for not having explained—certain things to you before now."

Whereupon Genevieve's mother launched into a general description of the joys of the marriage-bed, with particular attention to how pleasant it could be for the bride, especially if the groom was experienced.

"At least we know Lord Theron is experienced," Genevieve observed with unbecoming asperity.

"My love!" Lady Randall raised a shocked hand to her throat. "I hope you've not been listening to backstairs gossip."

"He told me himself, when he proposed. I said I didn't mind. And I don't. It's not that." Her color rose. "I rather liked that."

"Ah," said her mother doubtfully. "Then what has occurred to distress you?"

Genevieve lowered her eyes to the damp cambric balled in her hands. "Well. He behaved…*oddly*, Mama. Not at all as he did before we were betrothed."

Lady Randall shrugged. "My love, all men behave oddly between the betrothal and the wedding. And he's been ill, remember? You must not make too much of it."

"No, Mama. But when he left us so suddenly that time he took sick, he acted so strangely. And his letters…" She picked at the handkerchief.

Lady Randall studied her daughter's face, dry now and fast returning to its usual charming color. "To be frank with you," Lady Randall said, "his family has a great reputation for…eccentricity. His father's life was very irregular, and his grandfather lived very much out of the world. Luckily, the Tremontaine men have always shown great good sense in their choice of wives. Why, the last duchess—the current duchess's great-aunt—was only a Tremontaine by marriage. Her husband's—indisposition—allowed her the entire guidance of his land and fortune."

She waited hopefully while Genevieve took this in, with all its implications. The expressive features passed from bewilderment to comprehension to dismay. "Mama!" The blue eyes were very wide. "I don't want to be married to a madman!"

Lady Randall realized she'd made a tactical error. "I never said a word about madness," she said severely. "I only said he might be eccentric. And there's nothing eccentric about his being over-eager—it's a tribute to your beauty, my love. You ought to be flattered. Why, there are married women who have to turn to other lovers for that kind of passion. Think how lucky you are, to be gaining both position and pleasure in one man." She gave her daughter's unquiet hands a dismissive pat. "Better? Good. The seamstress will be here soon with your bride-gown. Run up to your room now, and bathe your eyes. They're a little swollen."

Like the good daughter she was, Genevieve obeyed, leaving the handkerchief balled up on the sofa behind her. When Lady Randall opened it, it fell into shreds. She shook her head. Bridal nerves, she thought. He probably put his hand on her breast. These Campions are sadly flighty. It is to be hoped he doesn't make her too unhappy.

book IV

SPRING

chapter I

SPRING CAME TO THE CITY. THE DAYS WERE growing longer. The snow had melted from all but the darkest and most stubborn of corners. Crocuses sprang from muddy crevices and, in back gardens, tender leaves began tentatively to unfurl. Fellowship examinations loomed, turning students' attention to their studies. Basil St Cloud cut the number of his lectures from four a week to two, and released his students from their archival burrowing.

"This is all wonderfully useful," he told them, turning over the latest batch of offerings. "I haven't the words to thank you."

"There's no need to thank us," said Lindley. "It's our duty."

"Besides, we've learned a lot," Blake said.

"And sneezed a lot," Vandeleur added.

"And disturbed the ancestral homes of countless spiders," Fremont went on.

"And mice," Godwin finished, not to be left out.

St Cloud laughed. "Well, you can leave them in peace now. I've come to a point where I need to go down there myself. It's no reflection on your abilities, my friends: there are rooms students can't get into, even with a magister's permission. You've done well."

Vandeleur, who had not enjoyed the Archives, insisted that they celebrate their deliverance from spiders and dust in a blowout at the Spotted Cow. "Just think," he said. "Out of University, sewing-girls by the dozen, and the best music in the city. Come on. It's spring."

Lindley, predictably, declined. And Godwin was expected at home. So it was just Vandeleur, Blake, and Fremont, and a high time they had of it, spending their last coppers on salmon and roast potatoes and good wine like men of taste, and dancing with all the prettiest girls. At least Vandeleur and Fremont danced. Justis spent most of the evening in earnest conversation with a brown-haired milliner's apprentice. She was country-bred, plump as a partridge in all the right places, with eyes as bright as a running brook and a sweet, soft laugh. Before the night was out, she'd told him all about her parsimonious mistress, who made her apprentices buy their own wood or sit sewing in the cold, and her mother in Swinton, and all her brothers and sisters, working back home to keep the farm. They danced twice and when they parted, she'd kissed him sweetly on the mouth. Justis was in love.

After that night, the inner circle of St Cloud's followers began to drift apart, and Henry Fremont found himself very much at a loose end. He went to lectures and he haunted the Nest, where he did his best to keep up Historians' Corner with Godwin and a few other students who fancied themselves as academic radicals. But he still had plenty of free time left over in which to worry.

The Northerner's visit had frightened Henry badly. In the lonely deeps of the night, he fretted over past crimes: his and the Northerners', actual and possible. What if the Companions of the King really were plotting to bring back the monarchy? What if Lindley, despite his oath, had told them of the meeting in the grove? What if Finn had not killed himself after all, but been a bloody sacrifice to their precious Land? What if, by some mischance, they discovered Henry's role in this series of imprisonments and betrayals?

And then Henry would remember Finn lying in the snow, a marble statue inexplicably toppled and sprinkled with scarlet paint, and the knowledge that he had been responsible gnawed at him like a rat. The end of it was that he decided to find Justis Blake and tell him all about it.

Justis was not particularly pleased to be found. Being a practical man, he had quickly realized that he could not keep both himself and his lady-love in fuel and food on the few silvers his father allowed him each term. So he compounded with a paper-seller in Lassiter's Row to set up a table in his shop for five coppers a week and became a public letter-writer.

And that was where Henry found him, solemnly taking dictation from an elderly lady in a red flannel shawl, who wanted to tell her son that she couldn't attend the birth of his third child.

The old lady described the misery in her back and legs that kept her from walking the twenty leagues to Endersby and the poverty that kept her from buying a place on the coach; Justis scribbled and suggested deletions and emendations. Henry fidgeted among the stacks of paper and board. Finally, the letter was written to her satisfaction and sealed with wax, three coppers were counted out into Justis's inky hand, and she was hobbling out in search of a post courier.

Henry folded his lanky frame into the client's chair. Justis frowned. "Go away, Fremont. I'm working."

Henry cocked his eye at the empty shop, the bored young man keeping it, and the window, fast darkening with dusk. "No, you're not. There's nobody here, and it's going to be dark soon, and that boy is aching to put up the shutters and have his supper. There's a little place around the corner with a nice smell coming out the door. Come talk to me, and I'll buy you whatever's making it. Come on, Justis. If you eat lightly, you can take what's left to your sweetheart."

Justis hemmed and Justis hawed, fearing that this unprecedented generosity was likely to come at a high price, but in the end, he went with Fremont, and listened to his story between bites of roast beef and dried pease porridge.

He'd been right. The price was high. Fremont's description of his seduction by Galing and Tielman made his teeth itch, though he was unsure which of that self-righteous trio angered him the most. Fremont, he thought, who had sold his honor for a few silver coins and a chance to feel important. Galing and Tielman were just acting according to their stations. Fremont had chosen to betray his friends.

Which is what he told Fremont, once he came to a halt. Fremont, who rather thought he should be praised for his honesty, began to justify himself, and Blake said, "Don't, Henry. Please. You did what you did for reasons that seemed good to you at the time. If they seemed good to you still, I doubt you'd be asking me for absolution. Well, I can't give it to you. Of course you hold yourself responsible for Finn's death. I do too."

Furious, Fremont called Blake names and offered to fight him. Blake kept eating calmly, leaving him to sputter himself to a standstill. Finally, Fremont poked at his untouched roast beef, drained his pot of beer, sighed heavily, and said, "You're right. I'm a worm, and I shit myself whenever I think what those Northern madmen might take it into their heads to do to me. What am I to do?"

"Land, Henry, I don't know. It depends on what you want to accomplish. If you're afraid of the Companions, you'd better slip out on a south-bound boat and go study foreign history at the University of Elysia. Personally, I think they're all flash and no fight, but then, I haven't gotten three of them thrown in jail. If you want to mend the harm you've done, you can't. You can, however, warn Doctor St Cloud that the Council of Nobles isn't as uninterested in University politics as he'd thought."

Fremont went even paler than he already was. “I was only trying to help him,” he said. “I was trying to prove that he was innocent of any connection with the Companions. And I think I succeeded.”

“Then you won’t mind telling him about it,” said Blake serenely.

“What about Finn? I thought we’d agreed Doctor St Cloud wasn’t to be upset.”

Blake looked grim. “He doesn’t need to know about that right now. Just the bit about the Council.” He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Are you going to tell him or not?”

“I don’t know,” said Fremont miserably. “I need to think.”

“I don’t,” said Blake, rising. “I’m going to go tell him now. You can come with me or not, as you like.”

Henry wiped his mouth and rose with him. What else could he do? There was no telling what Blake would make of his story to St Cloud. And a man must make his own apologies, after all—it was only right.

Justis smiled as though he’d been watching the progress of Henry’s thoughts through a window in his head. “Good man,” he said, and the two students went out into the evening air.

The streets of the Middle City were always crowded at this time of night. Shop girls, apprentices and clerks, merchants in fur-lined cloaks, and whores in second-hand velvet jostled one another on the narrow walkways, heading toward home or supper. Carts splashed through the mud; carriages and chairs conveyed the rich to their evening’s entertainment. A curtained chair went by, carried by four stout men in brown livery: Lady Randall going to Riverside to take supper with her future in-laws.

It was full night, damply cold but without the sting of winter. At home, Justis thought, the willows would be blushing gold, the whitethorn buds would be swelling toward blossom, and the early lambs would be robbing his father’s men of their night’s sleep. Was farming a better life than learning? he wondered. It was certainly simpler, both practically and morally, and it produced something of undoubted worth. And it did not usually lead to fistfights and intrigues and corpses in the wood. Perhaps he should marry Marianne, take her out of this infernal city they both hated. His mother would like Marianne, he was sure.

Fremont had no such pleasant reflections to shorten his way, but trod the paths of self-disgust he’d worn into his soul. When they reached

Minchin Street, he was almost eager to confess himself to Doctor St Cloud and receive either his forgiveness or his just punishment.

There was no answer to Blake's knock or his call, but the latch lifted when he tried it, and no outcry greeted the opening door or their timid entrance. The room was dark, save for one candle burning on a long table drifted deep in books and papers and a low fire smoldering in the narrow hearth. A man sat beside it, his hands folded around a book on his lap. When he heard the door, he turned, regarded Blake and Fremont blankly, and turned again to the fire.

"Doctor St Cloud?" It was a real question. The young doctor's face was gray, unshaven, his eyes red and strained. The room smelled of damp and ink and old, musty books.

"Go away," he said. "I'm working."

Fremont made a choking noise that might have been a laugh and might have been a sob. Blake glared at him, daring him to flee. Fremont glared back. "It's Fremont, sir," he said, holding Blake's gaze. "Fremont and Blake. We have something to tell you."

"It must wait until the test is done." Doctor St Cloud's voice, at least, was as it had always been, deep and clear and reasonable.

"I'm afraid it can't wait, sir," said Blake apologetically. "Not until the debate, at any rate."

Fremont decided to grasp the poker by the hot end. "It's about the debate, you see. Lord Nicholas Galing thought you were trying to restore the monarchy. He—"

St Cloud lifted his hand to stop him. "I don't often have guests," he said apologetically. "This is my only chair." He gestured toward the bed. "Please, sit. Who is Lord Nicholas Galing, and how did he come to be interested in me?"

For the second time that night, Fremont told his story. It wasn't as bad as the first time. To be sure, Blake was radiating disapproval as a tanner's yard radiates stink, but Doctor St Cloud listened to his every word with an eager intensity, nodding from time to time, asking questions when Henry faltered.

"Interesting," he said at last. "These nobles are a suspicious crew, imagining threats to their power and influence behind every bush and under every black robe. They have been so since Alcuin came South, and

probably before. They disliked the kings. But the wizards they hated." He looked down at the fat leather-bound book he held in his hands.

Silence lengthened. Henry shifted his seat on the hard mattress, but Doctor St Cloud made no sign he'd heard. It was as if he'd forgotten the existence of his two visitors.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Justis Blake tightly. "Is that all?"

Doctor St Cloud glanced up. "Is what all?"

"Fremont here tells you he's been spying on you for some noble who is looking for evidence of a monarchist plot, and all you've said is that you find his tale interesting." Blake was clearly struggling to keep his tone properly respectful. "Aren't you worried?" he continued. "These men put Finn and Lindley in the Chop, and a couple of Northerners, too. We didn't want to tell you this, but you need to know. Alaric Finn is dead. He killed himself when he was released. The Northerners have disappeared. This is serious business, sir. I'd be worried, were I you."

Doctor St Cloud smiled gently. "Justis Blake. Dear, responsible Justis Blake. What a Crescent you would make, were you born noble. This news, for all its gravity, is the smallest of the ills that torment me. This is a time of testing for all of us—for you and for me, for Lord Galing and his master, for Theron Campion and his bride, for the parrot Crabbe, and for those Northern fools who call themselves the Companions of the King."

Fremont said, "If I've been tested, I've failed miserably. I might as well kill myself, like poor Finn, and be done with it."

"You've failed only if you think the test is over," said St Cloud. "The Feast of Sowing approaches, but has not yet come." With sudden energy, he pulled his chair up to the long table and laid the book on the papers. "Thank you for coming to warn me, Blake, Fremont. It was kindly and well done. You remind me that I have a great deal of work to do. I think I shall be forced to suspend my lectures completely until the challenge has been fought. Please tell the others."

He glanced encouragingly toward the door and watched as first Fremont, and then Blake, reluctantly rose from the bed and walked out to the stairwell. Fremont descended straightaway, but Blake turned in the door and said, "What will you do, sir?"

Doctor St Cloud scrubbed his face with both hands. "Work, Blake. I need to work. Now go away and leave me alone."

Feeling as though the world had gone mad and he the only sane man left in it, Blake slammed the door and pounded down the steps. He needed a drink; he needed to lose himself in Marianne's sweet body. Doctor St Cloud and the rest of *it* would be there in the morning, as his mother used to say. Tonight, he'd had enough.

THERON REMAINED IN THE SAFETY OF HIS BELOVED house. He did not think it wise to see Genevieve again. Her letters, coming to him scented with her skin, sent him to his bed for relief. The thought of her dark hair lifted off her neck made him shiver. The wedding was a good idea. In a few months, he could satisfy himself on her whenever he wished. He wished it could be sooner. Perhaps they could move it up. How long could it take to plan a wedding, anyway?

Meanwhile, he prowled the odd and twisting corridors of the Riverside house, looking for diversion. There was something he needed, but nothing interested him. He could not read. He tried poetry, science, even sensational romances, but the words were only words, sounds represented by hard black shapes; he could not seem to get them to cling together and make sense. He could, he thought, listen to music. He would like that. But Sophia kept no musicians. So he drifted out into the streets of Riverside, looking for some.

Toward the end of the day, the island began to come awake. Theron wandered past tavern doors, listening for the sound of someone playing. At the Awl in Owl, an old blind Northern harper, who made music when he wasn't too drunk and his harp wasn't in pawn, had struck up a tune. The tavern stench of people and beer and boiling grease was too strong for Theron; but he leaned against an outside shutter, glad of the cool air, listening. He wanted to weep for love of the music and love of the people who were united with him in listening and loving it, too. A man came out of the tavern and nearly pissed on his boots in the twilight. When the man saw him, he swore and pulled out a knife, but Theron said, "Hush. Hush," and drew silver from his purse, and gave it to the man to give to the harper.

He dreamed that night of a wild harping, a tune like the blind man's but more filled with ornament, played by a man with gold around his wrists.

Theron and his companions danced with knives, a pattern that allowed for no misstep. At first it was hard, but then it was easy. They knew they were being watched, and held their heads high, flashing their braided hair in the torchlight, their bodies nearly naked, their skin oiled and shining. Under a canopy, a group of men dressed in furs stood watching them dance. He felt the eyes of one upon him, heating the oil on his skin.

In the morning he was exhausted. He lay in bed until nearly noon, and then decided he should go to the Randalls', and then decided that he should not. Instead he wrote Genevieve a letter all about his longing for her. He judged it quite fitting and poetic until he read it over and discovered it contained obscenities. He went down to the library, and word by word, copied out a love poem by Aria. He had discovered that if he wrote each word without looking at the next, he could do it clearly. At the end of the poem he added the line, "He speaks for me," and signed it.

The next day, Genevieve wrote back to say she liked the poem, and wondered if he could tell her more about the author. He decided that a literary engagement would do very well, indeed—for one thing, it would be nice if she knew something about poetry when they were married. Theron took himself up to the bookshops of Lassiter's Row to find something suitable. He found an Aria nicely bound and asked to have it delivered.

"Will you inscribe it, sir?" the bookseller asked. Theron took the pen, and could think of nothing to write but, "For G with love from TC." Who was TC? he wondered. Did those lines and curves really represent him?

"The pen, sir?"

He had been drawing on his own hand, *TC*, covering himself with the letters. "Oh," he laughed, and the man laughed with him, and Theron left, blushing.

To steady himself, he walked into a jeweler's he knew; Katherine had taken him there to choose a ring for himself when he turned eighteen, a setting for one of the Tremontaine rubies. The jeweler recognized Lord Theron. He was sufficiently up on the gossip of the nobility to congratulate him on his engagement.

"And if you're looking for a gift for the happy lady, my lord, we have a few little trinkets that I can show you."

Theron looked at lockets and rings and brooches, but nothing caught his fancy. The jeweler smiled, and made a respectful quip about young love.

"Well," he concluded, "another time. But meanwhile I will show my lord something very splendid—a piece of work such as doesn't come along every day." He unlocked a leather case and brought it forth for inspection. "Weeks, my man was, working on this." It was a collar, a necklace, all in well-wrought gold, each piece shaped and carved in a pleasing harmony of curves and curls. Its base was hung with moonstones like drops of water. Or tears, Theron thought, or the semen that glistens on the tip of a man's tool.

"I'll have this," he said. "For my bride. A bride-gift. It's appropriate. Please have it sent, and put it on my account."

"Will that be the duchess's account, my lord, or would you prefer to open your own account now for your new household!"

His new household? Yes, he'd discussed all this with Marcus, with Katherine, and with lawyers. On his marriage, Theron's revenues would be increased, properties signed over to him; Genevieve's family, of course, was providing some of them. His wife would want to buy jewels for herself, and she might buy them here, on credit. "My own account," he said, "please."

He went home and wrote to Marcus that he had exceeded his current funds. He dug the bill out of his pocket. The necklace cost the same as a carriage, more than most people earned in a year. Far exceeded his current funds, and could Marcus please see that the bill was covered by advancing money from his Highcombe rents—no. He drew a hard black line through the name, and the pen spluttered ink all over the page. Not Highcombe. He'd not ask Basil's family to pay for his bride-gift. He put his head down on his ink-stained fist, and rubbed the place where it ached, the temples from which Ysaud had painted springing horns. He wanted Basil. Basil needed no gold, no jewels; Basil was a fur coverlet in a wooden bed; Basil was a chest full of rare books; Basil was nights and days that flowed into each other without boundary.

"Lord of my heart," he wrote, "lord of my pulsing blood—I live to offend you and to make good the fault. I live because of you. The woods are thick, but I will find you and kneel at your feet, and you will return me to myself. Please advance me the revenues of whatever you can find that is not already my father's, something that is mine or will be mine when I have tied myself to the Land."

WHEN MARCUS FFOLIOT READ THERON'S NOTE, much blackened with crossings-out and insertions, he set out at once for Riverside. It was an uncharacteristic thing for him to do; it was as if Theron's own impetuousness had infected him. And, indeed, after a little walking had given his fancy a chance to cool, Marcus altered his direction and went instead to a much closer house, the house of his eldest daughter, Diana.

He found her in the nursery, which gave them the pleasure of adoring a very small baby together.

"You've heard," Marcus began, wiping drool off his shoulder, "Lord Theron is getting married."

"Mother told me. It's odd; he seems so young."

Her father smiled. "He's older than you were when you married Martin."

Diana shrugged. "Theron isn't practical. Always with his head in a book, or else helplessly in love with someone—I was going to say, someone unsuitable, but clearly this girl's not unsuitable. Do you want your lambie?"—this last addressed to the restless baby, who was gnawing on her sleeve. "Da, get his lamb, would you? It's on the chest."

"He's trying to be practical. But, as you say, it doesn't come naturally." Marcus handed the lamb to his grandson.

"Yum, yum, my sweetikins! What's she like, his intended? She doesn't paint, I hope?" Diana added acerbically.

Marcus chuckled. "I don't know. Perhaps you should ask him. You and Isabel, I mean."

His daughter smiled a private smile. "Is this a *duchess* perhaps or a *Sophia* perhaps?"

"It is a *Ffoliot* perhaps. I don't want to bore you with details—" She grinned; this was longstanding family code for *It's none of your business* "—but I think he is not altogether sure of what he wants. He seems to be trying both to please and to annoy his elders. We are useless appendages, my dear, fit only for signing over large sums of money. Which I admit I am very good at. But perhaps—well, you're near his age. And you're already married. Theron might benefit from your experience."

"And we know all his tricks. If this is just another stupid crush gone too far, we'll have it out of him before dinner."

THERON WAS GLAD OF THE INVITATION TO VISIT WITH the twins. It kept him from thinking about going to the University. It was as if parts of the city had become closed to him—marked DANGER as clearly as if he'd seen a map printed with the sign. He wanted so badly to see Basil; but where Basil was, it was not safe for him to go. In the streets of University, someone would notice him, and ask him a question he could not answer; they would see what he was, and what he was not, and men with bells and torches would harry him through the wood by night. On the Hill, there was the danger of Genevieve, and his cousin the duchess. And between the Hill and Riverside were shops where jewels could be had at a price he could not pay.

Isabel lived in the Middle City, well across the river from University—below the Hill, beyond the docks, in a district of small shops and artisans. Her husband, Carlos, was a musician; their rooms were far less grand than the little house Diana's banker had bought, but Isabel's place was closer to Riverside. He supposed that was the reason they'd chosen it to meet with him.

The girls smelt warm and milky when he hugged them. "Ooh!" Isabel tweaked the braid in his hair. "Love-knot?"

Blushing, he undid it with his fingers. He kept finding them—he must be doing it without thinking, weaving little braids in when he was trying to read or write.

Diana asked, "Are you going to cut your hair for the wedding? Oh, where are my manners?" She held out a formal hand. "Please accept our sincere best wishes for your future happiness. Now tell us everything!"

The rooms were sun-washed, white-walled, clear of all but the most basic furniture, though what there was was well-made. Theron recognized the carpet he'd sent, in a place of honor on the dining-table. By far the most costly and beautiful thing in the place was an elaborate keyboard, Carlos's instrument. "Is he out?" Theron asked. "I'd love to hear some music later."

Isabel glowed. "He should play you his new variations, then. I think they are absolutely beautiful, but he's still fussing to get them perfect for Lady Montague's spring revels."

Theron nodded.

"Tell us about your bride," they demanded. "Is she pretty?"

"Very."

"I do wish that we could meet your lady first. Da has, but he won't say a word. I suppose you've been giving grand suppers up at Tremontaine House for her family and all."

Isabel said wistfully, "If only we were younger—we could dress up some night as serving maids at supper and spy on the whole thing!"

"Wicked, Is. We'll see her at the wedding."

"And after—Oh, Theron," Isabel took his hands, "you will bring her to dinner at Katherine's with us? Family dinners, I mean?"

He tried and failed to imagine the small, quiet Lady Genevieve sitting at table with Katherine in a brocade loose gown pitching breadcrumbs at Marcus, while the twins and Sophia discussed nursery diets.

Holding his gaze, Isabel's eyes filled with tears. "Is that what this means, then? That you're going to go all lordly and grownup and leave the family?"

"How could I?" he whispered. "You are my family." He kissed her cheek. Her sister's head was on her shoulder. "I'll still come to dinner, even if Genevieve doesn't care to," he said. He looked at the two women, mirrors of each other even to their motherly gowns, coifed hair, and ringed hands, standing with their arms around each other's waists, as they always had. "How can you ask me such a thing?" Theron demanded. "You're the ones who did it first—went out and found husbands and left us all."

They looked at each other, and only they understood what the look meant.

Isabel said abruptly, "There's fruit and cheese and barley water; I didn't think anyone would want chocolate at this hour."

The food was set out on the table like a still life, with pearl-handled fruit knives and painted plates. Just as they were sitting down, there was a yelp and a cry from the other room. Isabel's hands flew up to cover the stain seeping through her bodice.

A child came in carrying the squalling infant, which was half as big as she was. Isabel unlaced her bodice and put the baby to her breast.

Theron gazed on the nursing child, at its perfect little fingers and the almond-shaped eyelids closed in bliss as it suckled. The most precious thing in the world, warm and soft and alive, new with possibility. He wanted to hold the baby close, to defend it against all comers. He wanted such a one of his own getting. If only he had started sooner—if he had married Isabel,

or Diana, it might be his child now that the woman held to her rich, round breast. He would create one soon, he and Genevieve; he would remember, when his life throbbed and pulsed within her at last, that when it burst into joy, its purpose was to make such a child, his child.

There was a heavy step outside the door. Mother and child sat very still, defenseless, lost in a milky feeding world of their own. Theron closed his fingers around a knife, and stood waiting for the door to open, for the intruder to reveal himself. He breathed softly, quietly, ready to spring.

The door opened slowly, slowly, and the man announced his presence by hooting like an owl. Theron tensed.

"Shh!" Isabel whispered; "she's nearly asleep!"

"Papa's home!" Carlos crooned, and Theron dropped the knife. "Shh!" the women hissed. The baby whimpered, then fell silent. Theron's heart was pounding; his skin tingled from the fight that had not happened. He had no name for what he felt: the love and the need to kill something, both at once, both focused on the sleeping child, and on Isabel, his old friend, now transformed under his protection.

He put a hand on Carlos's shoulder. "Take care of her," he said, his voice thick with this new passion.

Carlos never took his eyes off his wife and child. "Oh, *she* takes care of *me*."

Theron's hand tightened. "I mean it."

"Of course."

Theron embraced him. "I want to hear your music. But not now. Come to Riverside; I'll have the spinet tuned. Music is very good." And to the women he said, "Thank you for—for a lovely day."

Diana glanced up from the little head. "Oh, Theron—can you not stay? We'd so much to tell you."

"I'm sorry," Theron said. "I must go. Now." It sounded ungracious, even unfriendly, but that was better than staying and doing he knew not what.

Carlos said, "Please give Lady Sophia our fondest regards."

"I will. I'll tell her about the baby." He smiled helplessly around at them all. "Goodbye."

When the door closed behind him, the sisters looked at each other. "I'll put her back to bed," said Is, and Diana said, "No, let me."

"Let me," said Carlos, so of course they let him.

Isabel looked over her table, still neatly spread except for one fruit knife, which was lying on the floor. "He didn't eat."

"It's bad," said Diana.

"It's worse than bad. He doesn't love this one at all."

"He's miserable. He's so nervous I can barely stand to be in the room with him." Diana picked up the knife and an apple, and angrily began to peel it. "I wish we could just march up to that Randall chit and tell her to leave him alone!"

Isabel hugged her. "What should we do?"

"We should probably tell Lady Sophia."

"What? That he's not in love with his intended? I expect she knows."

"If only she'd cry off," Diana said.

"Why doesn't *he* cry off? Take back the proposal, say he's changed his mind?"

Her sister the banker's wife looked at her with patient exasperation. "Papa's already drawn up the contracts. Theron can't break them now."

"But Genevieve Randall can?"

Diana drummed her fingers. "It is the woman's right. But for a lord to reject his contracted bride—well, for all of the things that men may do to us with impunity, it should be comforting to know that this is not one of them."

"Hmm." Isabel fiddled with her laces. "I say, do it anyway. What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"For her? It implies that he has found fault with her—judged her and found her wanting somehow. No one else would be in a hurry to offer for her. It could ruin her life. It's an insult, anyway."

"In the old days, it would have meant a swordsman for sure. A challenge to Theron, maybe even to the death. Do the Randalls keep a swordsman?"

"How do I know? They could certainly hire one. But even if they didn't, it would make him look bad. People would start up again talking about how rackety the Campions are, and bringing up old stuff about Katherine, and—and Lady Sophia. The next time Theron picked a bride, the contract would be brutal."

"She *must* cry off!"

"Why should she? He's a catch."

"Maybe she's really very nice."

"I doubt it," Diana said gloomily. "He's always had abominable taste in women."

Isabel said quietly, "Di. Did you ever wish that you and Theron—"

Diana looked at her sharply. "Of course not."

"Oh. It's just that, that summer we were sixteen, you were on at him all the time, and at home you talked about him."

"Well, what else was there to talk about?" Diana asked fiercely; "Andy's cough? Theron had an interesting life; we didn't." She laid the apple on a plate, cut neatly in quarters. "Meeting Martin was the best thing that ever happened to me. I love banking."

Isabel deemed it wise to change the subject. "By the way," she said, "Mother told me they've invited Jessica to the wedding."

"No! She'll never come!"

"Of course she will—if the invitation finds her. She's out there somewhere, on that ship of hers. If anything would bring her home, I'd think it would be the chance to see her brother get married."

In the next room, music began.

Isabel said, "Let's eat."

chapter II

IT WAS NO GOOD, THERON THOUGHT; WHEREVER HE went it was no good. The things he wanted were all wrong, and he wanted them with a gut-twisting fierceness. He wanted Genevieve for the easing of his body, and

because he thought she meant he'd have to give up nothing; instead, he had lost the thing he valued most. Which was Basil.

He had a hazy memory of some kind of quarrel—Basil wanted him to be king, that was it. And he'd been angry because he thought Basil didn't understand who he really was. Theron remembered himself as being independent, a scholar, a thinker, even a poet: a man of discriminating tastes. But he was none of those things, now. Basil had been right after all. Basil had told Theron the truth over and over about himself: he was his blood, his blood, and nothing but his blood. And Theron had laughed, argued, ignored what he'd heard.

Despite his fear of University, he would go back to Basil, and agree to everything and end this torment. He would be whatever Basil wanted him to be. Together they would rut like stags in autumn; he would find ease and comfort, acceptance and understanding. His was the blood of kings—*Mad kings*, a voice inside him whispered. *Are you ready, little prince, to do what they must do?*

"What must I do?" he cried aloud, and started at the sound of his own words.

Terence tapped on the door, and entered. "Yes, my lord?"

It took all his strength to keep from hurling something at his servant. "Don't come in," he said tightly, "unless I bid you."

"I thought I heard you call, sir," Terence said patiently.

"I did call, but not to you. Leave me."

"With respect, sir—"

"How can you respect me?" Theron demanded. "You clean my dirty clothes—my dirty body—What is this *me* that you respect?"

Taking a deep breath first, the servant replied, "My lord. Theron. Your nerves are in a perilous state. I would walk across the city to get you the remedy, but I don't know where it is to be found."

"Not," said Theron, "among my mother's medicines."

Terence stood there, his capable hands hanging empty at his sides. When his master said nothing more, he asked, "Is it the dreams, sir?"

"Dreams? What dreams?" Theron said.

Terence looked down. "As my lord says, I know his habits better than most."

Theron had told no one of the dreams. He suddenly wanted to spill everything to this calm, familiar figure. Terence was never shocked. Terence was competent. He would find a way, some way to relieve him of his burden, as he found ways to remove a grease stain from a jacket. He said, "Terence, I need a wizard."

His servant smiled at the joke. When Theron did not smile back, he said, "A wizard, sir?"

"Yes."

"What…sort of wizard, sir?"

Theron stared at him. "Get out," he shouted.

The manservant looked as if he would say something—but then, without a word, he bowed and closed the door behind him. In a fever of rage and despair, Theron pulled clothes from a chest and dressed himself and left the house.

DAY AFTER DAY, BASIL SANK DEEPER INTO HIS WORK. Martindale's history of the wizards, Karleigh's memoirs, Arioso's daybooks, the long lists of wizards and the pedigrees of the kings, the ballads and the legends and the festivals, the notes and fragments his students had found for him in the Archives: these were his whole world. And the Book, always the Book, tempting him with small spells of finding and persuasion to aid him in his task. Nothing else existed. Enemies, friends, false lover, all were as the wax that puddled and hardened at the base of his candlestick: the residue of flames long dark and cold. He ate only what the scruffy boy, unasked, brought him from the cookshop once a day, and slept only when the pen fell from his cramping hand and his heavy eyes pulled his head down onto the papers in front of him.

He hated sleeping. Sleep wasted time. Sleep brought dreams as sharp and bright as the stained glass in the Great Hall, dreams of rushing through the streets of University, late for a lesson, tossing his long hair back from his face, tugging his tunic straight, bending his head for his magister's salute, learning to bring fire from a stone.

"Guidry was the last to speak the Old Tongue," his magister said, his sorrowful eyes fixed on the green flame licking out of a hunk of turquoise.

"He didn't want anyone to know all he knew. And now we know so little, with more lost every year. I wonder if he knows, Guidry the Deathless, wherever he is sleeping. I wonder if he cares?"

I *care*, Basil heard a voice whisper as he woke from that dream, and immediately went to drown the memory in clean water. But the pitcher was empty, the chamberpot full, the hearth cold, and the air colder still from the thin spring rain. Cursing, Basil huddled on a coat and gown, excavated a few coins from various caches, and left his room for the first time in days.

Some little thread of common sense told him that he was filthy and hungry and cold to the bone, that the Governors would judge against him unheard if they saw him in this state. So he went to the baths, and then to a quiet tavern he'd never visited before, which turned out to serve a very decent roast of mutton and young salad. On the way home, he stopped by the wood-monger's and ordered a bushel to be delivered to Minchin Street. Feeling more himself than he had since the night of his quarrel with Theron, he thought as he crossed Kingsway to Minchin, Of course it wasn't a spell. If there was magic once, there isn't any longer, and besides, I have no training. He's just tired of me, and I'm well rid of him.

At the street door, Basil smiled at the scruffy boy, who smiled nervously back and said he was sorry, but the gentleman wouldn't have it that the master weren't seeing no visitors, and if Doctor St Cloud wanted, he'd go for the Watch, for he didn't think anything short of that would discourage him. Justis, St Cloud thought ruefully, gave the boy a copper, and thanked him for his many kindnesses. The boy blushed and grinned, took the copper and said he didn't mind. Basil ruffled his greasy hair and mounted the stairs with a light step, ready to tease Justis for being a nursemaid.

But it wasn't Justis sitting outside his door. It was Theron, his knees drawn up, his head down, his hair like a fine silk shawl draped over all.

The sight of him worked on Basil like a blow. He gasped and clutched the railing to keep from falling, to keep from running forward and taking Theron into his arms or striking him across the impossibly beautiful face he raised from his knees.

Theron was thinner than he had been, his cheeks gaunt, his eyes huge and liquid under bruised lids. He was dressed in brown and fawn, with a gold drop in his ear and a lovelock braided into his hair, and he looked

haunted, hunted, hungry as a stag before the snow releases the grass in springtime. The air was thick with the smell of musk.

Basil worked his mouth, trying to find something to say. "Get up," he managed at last. "You're in the way."

Obediently, Theron scrambled to his feet, hesitating with his hands braced against the floor as if he wasn't sure whether he could stand upright. Basil thought he saw horns springing in the hollows of his temples where Basil had once kissed him. Then Theron straightened and moved politely aside, allowing Basil to come up the last steps, unlock the door, and open it.

"You may as well come in," Basil snapped. "I'm not inclined to quarrel with you on the public stair."

Theron bowed his head, stepped delicately over the threshold, and halted, his nostrils flaring as he tasted the air. He snorted, backed up a step.

Basil growled with impatience. "Come *in*, damn it! And close the door. I'm not your servant."

White was showing all around the greenish pupils, and the fine body was trembling in its fine clothes, but Theron closed the door as he'd been told. Then he paced forward through the wadded paper and spoiled pens and books, knelt at Basil's feet, and leaned his head against Basil's leg.

By this time, Basil was trembling as hard as Theron was. Triumph, jealousy, lust, and rage shook him as a bear shakes a dog in its jaws. He felt himself swell, answering the need straining at Theron's tight fawn breeches. He laid his hand lightly on Theron's head, burrowed his fingers into the silky hair, and pulled his head back and away to look into his startled face.

"You mistake your place, my lord. This is not the Hill, nor am I a noble maiden. I will bring you no dowry, no land, no sons." Deliberately, he tapped Theron gently between the legs with his booted foot. "Take this to her, my lord. It is none of mine."

Theron moaned and reached out to stroke Basil's thighs. Basil caught his groping hands and thrust him roughly backward. A part of him exulted in the success of his spell-casting. Theron was indeed transformed. In the old days, in the North, it had been a complete transformation: bone, sinew, and skin.

"I do not lie with beasts," Basil said. "Go from me until your time is accomplished and your crown is won. You must come to yourself before you come to me." Then Basil straightened, settled his weight into his feet,

planted deep in the wooden floor, raised his arms, took the wind into his hands, and blew the Little King to his feet and toward the wild, where he must run until he tamed the beast within himself.

WHEN HE KNEW WHERE HE WAS AGAIN, THERON was standing on the embankment over the river. The University was behind him, and the ancient Council buildings. The smell of the river was wild. The green-brown water rushed past below him, on its way to the harbor mouth, where it released the detritus of the city, and the last of its memories of the great upcountry. He thought for a moment of leaping into the flood—not so much thought as felt his body poised for flight, to join the glory of that passionate, anonymous flow. But what he desired was more earthy, less exalted.

Theron remembered a place he knew, where a man could be had for the price of a drink, and headed down the river to the Apricot.

The Apricot had a low, narrow doorway off a street of tailors and leather-fitters, where men worked only until the light began to fade. In the glooming dusk, after they'd gone home, the tavern began to gather its custom. Theron paused in the doorway, his fingers still clenched on the solid wood of the door. The smell of all the men inside, the heat of them, made him giddy. They were waiting for him. But the noise, the constant motion in the close room, meant danger. He breathed deeply, filling his head with the scent, and plunged inside.

As quickly as he could, Theron made his way to the long counter where drinks were dispensed. He downed one of the small fierce glasses of clear apricot brandy the place was famous for, and then another. Around him, men were taking each other's measure. The musk of their desire was heavy on the air, rising with the fumes of the liquor: brandy and sex and sweat and old fruit in the sun.

He felt a hand on his leg. A man nearly as tall as he was, with a soft ginger beard, his breath cloves and apricot as he said, "Another drink, scholar?"

Theron spun him around, locking his arm behind his back. "Easy, sweetheart," the man gasped. "You do understand what we're here for, don't

you? Do you know what this place is?"

Theron did not speak. He stroked the man's face, then forced him to his knees, pressing him farther down, until his head was touching the floor. He put his foot on the man's body. Then he turned away.

"You're a nasty piece of work," said a man in red. "I thought students were supposed to be mild. What are you studying, dear? Venery?"

He was in too close; Theron shoved him back, but the man closed in again, trying to bring his body's heat, the scent of his skin and his hair within Theron's bounds. It was intolerable. Theron shoved him harder. The man fell back, bouncing against another group of customers, who turned with irritated growls.

One of them took the man's arm: "What is it, Fred? This kid giving you trouble?"

Fred shrugged. "I guess he doesn't fancy me."

"You want Big Lou to throw him out?"

But Big Lou had found Theron for himself. Lou moved slowly, as though his bulk made him swim through air like deep water. But it was not his size that held him back; he was stalking, approaching the young student carefully, not to startle him. The Apricot gave Lou plenty of experience with men who were not as stable as they might be.

Lou held out his hand. It was huge as a ham, and empty. "Evening," Lou said. "Everything here to your satisfaction?"

"Everything," Theron echoed.

"I wonder," Lou said, "if you might be looking for those other longhair boys—the ones with the oak leaves in their hats?"

"Oak leaves?"

"Because I chucked them out, an hour or so back. We don't like seditious talk here—though I understand the brandy can drive a man to extremes."

"I am not here to talk." Theron handed him a silver coin: a man's wages for a week.

Lou considered it, and took it. "Is that another brandy for you, sir?"

Theron felt the drink burn along his arms, down his legs, right into his fingertips.

A man came up beside him, tall and swaggering. "Kiss me," he said, and Theron wrestled him to the ground—a good fight, muscle against muscle,

sinew against sinew, enough to rouse him, but not enough to satisfy. He felt the other men's interest, their breathing, their fury and admiration; he would stand against them all, and make them know their master, and bow to do him homage.

A circle had formed, like a clearing in the forest, with Theron at its center. A man, very drunk, rushed at him headfirst. Theron fought the urge to lower his own head and lock horns with him; instead he ducked his shoulder and took the blow there, sending the drunk reeling out of the circle. Another man danced in like a cat, sinuously prowling the edges of Theron's space, stalking closer and closer. Theron moved his hands until they caressed the man's body, a long and luxurious *pas de deux*, intimate and stimulating, teasing and inaccessible, that ended finally with the man curled up at his feet. Theron did not spurn him, but let him lie, and turned to face his next challenger.

There was betting going on, and kissing and stroking in corners where men went to hold each other and watch the fight. Theron threw down man after man, and cast them out. His desire grew, and he was lighter of heart than he had been in weeks.

When his true opponent came, Theron was ready for him. His hands locked on firm muscles, a solid strength that could stand against his. They stood perfectly balanced, and Theron trembled with the effort. The man was panting, sweating with desire—and that was what undid him. On a single breath he weakened, and in that breath Theron took him down, forced the man to his knees, and held him there for all to see.

He heard cheering as he took his prize.

THERON AWOKE ON A DIRTY MATTRESS WITH BITE marks on his shoulders and no money in his pockets, in a house he would never find again. He made his way out into the morning and home to Riverside, where he left his crumpled clothes by the bed and slept until afternoon.

Then he called Terence to bathe and shave him, and bring him chocolate and bread and butter and preserves and sweet rolls and an omelet and fruit and more chocolate. He apologized sweetly for his temper of yesterday, and said he was much better. He truly was. He felt light, his

head clear, even his body free of its terrible sluggish weight of yearning. He dressed in tawny velvet and went to call on his betrothed.

The Randalls were glad to see him. Genevieve said he looked pale, then blushed at her familiarity. Lady Randall suggested that the young people walk in the garden together. Genevieve looked mildly alarmed, but Theron smiled encouragingly, and stood aside to let her pass without taking her hand.

In the garden, though, when they stopped beside a blooming cherry tree, she looked up at him and told him that the golden necklace he'd sent was the most wonderful gift she'd ever received, and they were going to alter her wedding gown so she could wear it. He looked down into the world of her sparkling eyes, the rosy flush of her parted lips, and knew she wanted him to kiss her. But he was afraid to break the fragile peace he'd earned himself last night.

He reached over her head to pull a spray of pink blossoms and handed it to her, saying that flowers or gold equally were inadequate to the task of adorning her lovely neck as it deserved. She nested the spray in her bosom and preceded him back to the house.

When Theron went home, he stuck his head into Sophia's study. His mother looked tired. He'd seen little of her these past days—some ruckus to do with her University women, and an outbreak of sickness across town. Indeed, when she noticed his velvet coat, Sophia gasped and grabbed at her papers: "Oh, no! We have a dinner tonight and I forgot?"

He came forward into the lamplight. "No, Mother. I was just paying a call at the Randalls'."

"Ah." She put the papers down. "She is well, your little girl?"

"Quite well."

"And you?" Sophia busied herself straightening papers as if he were already gone. Impulsively, Theron knelt at her feet and laid his head in her lap. He closed his eyes and breathed in the sharp smell of the herbs her clothes were stored in. "And you, Theron?" she asked softly.

"I don't know," he answered her. "From day to day, I really do not know."

His mother stroked his hair. "It's all right, my love. It's always been hard for you, these sudden changes in your life that you make. And you will make them. One minute you wish to be a swordsman, the next a scholar. One moment you are the world's greatest astronomist, the next a rhetorician."

He laughed uncomfortably. “So maybe all this is for the best: you marry, you have a wife to love and keep—something that’s always real, always solid, that does not change; something to build over the years whatever else happens, no?”

“Perhaps.”

She heard the uncertainty. “If you change your mind, Theron, about this marriage—”

“No,” he sighed.

“That is good. I know your moods. You can be difficult,” she teased, twisting a lock of his hair. “Did you know? So charming, until you’ve had too much of it—like a little boy sick on sweets. And then you are moody, you do not talk at all. Everyone thinks, ‘What is wrong? What’s the matter with him, is he all right?’ But then you come around all by yourself. I think about telling her that, your sweet bride, but she’ll find out on her own. And she will love you anyway, just as the rest of us do.”

It was a long time since she had sounded so loving and easy. Theron took her hand from his hair and kissed it. “Thank you, Mama. I’m sure I will be happy.”

“Oh, no.” She took his chin in her hand, and looked at him tenderly. “You are not sure at all. But perhaps that is good.”

He leaned into her hand and murmured, “Mama. I have bad dreams.”

“So do we all, my son,” she said sadly. “Shall I make you a posset to help you to sleep?”

“Yes, please.”

The hot liquid put him to sleep, but he was only shutting the door to one world of incomprehensible demands to open it on another. The world of his dreams was full of trees and torches. A man he knew was Basil, who looked like a bear, held him in his dark-furred arms and said, “You will be king. I have chosen you and you will run for me, and stand the trial.”

“What is the trial?” he whispered, his cheek against the man’s warm fur.

The bear pressed a finger to his lips. “Oh, Little King, that is secret wisdom. No man knows that but the wizards, and the king who does not fail his trial. And when you have succeeded, you will not wish any man to know what you had to do.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“I? Of course I do.”

"How do you know that I can do it?"

"It is my business to choose wisely. I chose you for your trial, out of all the Little Kings that the land has grown for herself. My chosen always triumph."

"But how shall I triumph if I don't know what to do?" he asked plaintively. His heart was pounding. He had only moments left to ask the right questions. Already he could feel the tingling in his legs, the way his muscles were bunching and regrouping into powerful leaping haunches. He reached out his hands to beg for more time, and heard the wizard laugh.

"Pay attention to your lesson, Little King, and it will go well for you. Know yourself, always. There's many a Little King has failed by failing to know himself."

Theron woke and struck a light and stared down at his face in his washbasin. He saw there the stag's head of Ysaud's pictures: liquid eyes, proud muzzle, branching horns.

He cried out, and woke for real, and stumbled out of bed. He pulled on the white shirt that he had worn, musky with his desire for Genevieve, and a black scholar's robe, and soft leather boots that covered his legs like a second skin. Then he went out into the night.

It was early yet in Riverside. The evening's entertainments were just beginning. Theron could have found a man or a woman on the street and had them for a handful of coins. A few more steps would have taken him to the most famous brothel in the city, where on his family's credit he could have enacted any and all of the bizarre scenes that plagued his sleep. But Lord Theron Campion passed Glinley's and pressed on across the bridge, toward the Apricot.

The men came alert when he entered. "That's him," he heard them say, as they drew aside in fear or amusement, disgust or caution. He didn't know which and he didn't care. This was his turf now, and he welcomed the green flame of his fighting spirit as it licked through his veins. He stood on the table, and felt the belling cry burst from his lungs.

The tavern was silent. "Well, well," a man said. "Come to put us all in our place again, are you?"

The man was not beautiful, but he was graceful, with a dancer's body and a head of black curls, a red mouth, and swarthy skin. Theron wanted him. He nodded his heavy-branched head, *Yes, I am come.*

"Fine," said the dark man, "that's fine. But none of your pussy wrestling this time. That's for nanny boys." A few men laughed, and others blushed. "Can you fight," the dark one said, "like a man?" He raised his arm up over his head. From his hand, like a claw, sprang sharp cold steel.

The tavern erupted. Big Lou pushed forward through the crowd, shouting, "None of that!" The dark man was rushed outside, and Theron followed, at the heart of a knot of men urging on the fight. Someone had seized a torch from the doorway, so that their shadows crossed and wrestled with each other on the street.

"Campion!" He heard the word over and over, until he realized it was directed at him, and he turned and saw several men with hair as long as his own, done in dozens of tiny braids. They'd been among the men who had hunted him into the grove at the year's turning. One of them was smaller than the others, his hair reflecting flame from the torchlight. Theron knew him—a follower of Basil's.

"Lindley…?"

The student pushed to Theron's side through the shouting, jostling crowd. "Have you got a knife?" he asked breathlessly.

"No."

"Take mine."

The handle was antler, the knife was sharp. Lindley was hastening him with the crowd around the corner to the dark courtyard of a deserted tannery. Theron could smell the residue of death and piss. It made him wild. In the circle of men, he sprang at his opponent. The knife felt good in his hand; when he was young, to prove he wasn't just a sickly boy who read books, he'd made one of the Riverside toughs take him into his gang. Sophia had put a stop to it, but not before he'd learned a lot.

The dark man pulled back sharply, surprised by his ferocity. Theron bared his teeth. With the knife in his hand he was hunter as well as hunted; he was man as well as beast. The power of the Land flowed up through his feet. He knew where his opponent's knife would be before he even moved. He heard the dark man's breathing as clear as words, telling him his body's thoughts. He smelt the man's fear. He wanted blood, he

wanted dominion. He feinted and ducked and slashed, driving onward to his mark.

"Blood!" the men shouted. "Blood! Blood!"

If it had been a swordfight, it would have ended right there, or else gone on to the death. But this fight occupied a middle ground between formal ritual and mortal honor.

The dark man's breathing was loud and ragged. He was gripping his knife wrist where it had been slashed, and staring white-eyed at the Deer King, poised to move edgily away from his glittering horn.

Theron did not close the space between them. Instead he slashed his knife upward in the air once, twice, and a third time, his blade blue in the moonlight, black where the vanquished man's blood stained it. The man fell to his knees as if in prayer. Theron stood over him, breathing hard, the night air filling his lungs. He lowered the knife, and held it out to his side.

Lindley took the knife from him. "My lord," he said, "that was well fought. The Companions are witness."

Theron didn't hear him. His eyes were fixed on the kneeling man, his erstwhile challenger. The man's dark head was down, low to the ground. Theron parted his gown and lifted his shirt to his waist. He said, "Yes, I can fight like a man. Now show how you appreciate it."

His pleasure was fierce and exalted. All of creation spun around his dominion and his joy.

When he returned to himself, there was no color at all in the world, just moonlight and shadow. The man with the knife was gone, and so were most of the ones who had been there watching, though some stood by or coupled in the shadows. Lindley was supporting him, and another person he did not know.

Lindley said, "I'll get you water."

Theron rasped, "No." He shook himself free of the sustaining arms, and stood alone. He shivered at the cold wind on his sweaty skin.

Lindley, again: "Shall I see you home? To Tremontaine House?"

"No."

"Hush, fool." It was the other one who had held him, a person as tall as himself in a heavy cloak and a large felt hat. "No names, I think, and no direction. I can see our young friend to safety."

Lindley moved in closer to Theron, demanding, "Who are you? You're not of the Companions."

"No, indeed," the other said. "I am of the Blood."

"The Blood," Lindley breathed, not quite comprehending.

"Yes," said the other in silky tones, "the Blood of Kings. It runs as true in my veins as in his." Theron felt his arm being taken in a grip so sure that he did not think to flee. "Come, my young lord. Sophia will be worried about you—and if she isn't, she should be."

The walk back to Riverside seemed to take forever. He was tired to the bone; at times, he even thought he slept as he walked. His companion's voice wove strands of meaning through his exhaustion: "What a wonderful evening!…I won't tell them where I found you, if you won't tell them I was wandering around down there…Come on, boy, it's only a cat!"—this when he jumped at a sound too close to them—"…I think Katherine will be just as happy if I stay in Riverside after all…This is the Bridge, Theron, we're nearly home…Pull yourself together, boy; you're going in the front door with me."

Then there was the familiar smell of his own hall, and light in his eyes, and his companion saying, "Do forgive me. I asked him to sneak out and meet me down by the docks before I put in my official appearance—childish, I know."

And Sophia's hands and voice were turned, not to him, but to the other; her voice was hushed with tears and she said, "Oh, my dear—you have your father's eyes, his very eyes as I remember them so well—the little lines right there—and there. Jessica, welcome home."

chapter III

When Lord Nicholas Galing went to call on Lord Theron Campion, he dressed as though for courting, in amethyst-colored wool cut very close to his figure, a waistcoat embroidered with water lilies, and a carnelian nestled in the discreet ruffles at his throat. Aping the severe academic style, he'd slicked his dark curls away from his face with gold clips and worn a gownlike cloak in place of his usual coat. He slipped two of Ysaud's drawings into a flat leather case, found a chair, and paid the chairmen the exorbitant sum they required to carry him across the Bridge to Riverside House.

He felt pleasantly excited, like a hound with the quarry in sight. He'd play Lord Theron, show him Ysaud's pictures if necessary, bring into clear focus the hazy pattern that surrounded him. No great scandal: just two men in a room, getting things straight. The boy was clever, but not subtle. To a man used to dealing with Arlen, it would be as simple as a game of checkers.

The first obstacle to Galing's admirable plan was Lady Campion's butler, who told him Lord Theron was not receiving visitors at present.

"Is he out?" Nicholas asked pleasantly. "Perhaps I might wait, then."

"Oh, he's here, all right. He just ain't receiving."

"Perhaps you might ask him? I am Lord Nicholas Galing."

The butler squinted at him. Since the great scar scrawled across his face from temple to chin traveled through his left eyelid, his squint was a fearsome sight indeed, but Nicholas did not quail. This steadfastness seemed to impress the butler, who said, "Well, I don't know. Come along of me to her ladyship, and we'll see what she has to say about it."

Nicholas laid his cloak across a chair, tucked the leather case under his arm, and followed the butler through a series of corridors spanning a variety

of architectural and decorative styles. He'd never set foot in Riverside House before, although he'd heard the stories. Seeing the place now, it was hard to believe in the legendary masked balls, the orgiastic gaming parties and wild frolics of the old duke's times. These rooms looked respectable and comfortable, even cozy, with their rich, dark carpets and flowered tapestries, their deep sofas and tables crowded with beautiful things. Nicholas wondered whether the duchess had redecorated.

"You was noticing me face," the butler remarked as he led the way up a steep staircase to a narrow landing with a door at each end.

Nicholas made an apologetic murmur.

"It's worth noticing. Her ladyship does pretty work. Beau Dartwell nearly had the eye out my head, but she sewed it back, like a button on a shirt, good as new. *And* she took me on as butler when old Leverre went out to pasture. I'd do anything for her ladyship, and that's a fact." He gave Nicholas a warning glare, then tapped on one of the doors, opened it, and said, "Lord Somebody or Other, my lady, come to see Lord Theron. I'll just keep myself handy in case you want him thrown out."

Galing stepped over the threshold with his best social smile pinned to his lips in time to hear a woman's voice saying, "Davy, I'm insulted. Don't you think I'm up to protecting Lady Sophia from some city boy?"

The voice belonged to one of the two women in the pleasant, sun-lit room—the one who was lounging on the sofa, looking as out of place as a parrot in an herb garden. Her hair was hennaed a blazing red, her face was bony and sunbrowned, her clothes were purple and scarlet and turquoise, of no recognizable style or fashion. She was smiling at Galing with frank curiosity.

Conscious that he'd been staring himself, Galing nodded curtly and turned to Lady Sophia, who was sitting in the bay window at a large, cluttered desk. She said, "Wicked girl," with affectionate composure, and introduced the colorful woman as Lady Jessica Campion. "And you, sir, are?"

Galing bowed low. "Lord Nicholas Galing, and your most obedient servant, Lady Sophia, Lady Jessica."

The colorful woman gave a snort of laughter. "Very nice," she said. "I can't wait to hear what he says next."

Behind his smile, Nicholas was consigning the whole of this unconventional household to the bottom of the Seventh Hell, thugs, half-

women, and all.

Lady Sophia seemed aware of his discomfort. "Hush, Jessie dear; you're embarrassing our visitor. Davy, you may go. I'll ring if I need you."

The scarred butler shrugged massive shoulders. "It's your funeral, my lady," he said ominously, and pulled the door to behind him with an ostentatious snap.

"Now, Lord Nicholas, come in and sit down and tell me what business brings you to see my son."

Nicholas was not accustomed to such plain speaking, especially from a woman. He took a moment to find a chair, glanced briefly at Lady Jessica, and said, "It is a private matter, meant for his ears only."

"Because," said Lady Sophia as if he'd not spoken, "if it is a matter of business, or money he owes you, you must apply to me, or to Marcus Ffoliot. My son is not yet of age."

"It is not business. I had the pleasure of meeting Lord Theron at the Randalls' at the time of his betrothal. We found we had interests in common. In fact, he was to attend the theatre in my party. But I hear he has been ill." Nicholas held out the leather case. "I brought him some offerings I thought might divert him."

"Oh, really?" Lady Jessica reached out one arm from the couch. "Art? I am something of an expert. Let's see."

Nicholas clutched the case tightly. "With your permission—I doubt a lady would find them diverting."

"Oh, dear," Sophia sighed.

"Smut," said Jessica. "Well, why not? Though I doubt you and he have quite as much in common as you'd think. What play, by the way?"

"*The Empress.* Do you know it?"

"I should. My mother created the role."

"My land," said Nicholas, inelegantly. "The Black Rose."

And this was her daughter: bastard off-shoot of the old duke and his actress mistress. "Lady" Jessica by courtesy only. The men at Lord Filisand's would be fascinated to learn she was in town.

"Just so," said Jessica, amused. "I'm surprised you've heard of her."

Nicholas smiled. "She was the greatest actress of her age, with a heart as great as her genius."

"A nice recovery," said Jessica. "But you did not come here to speak of my mother."

Nicholas regretted that it was no longer considered acceptable to call challenge on a woman. The quirk of Jessica's long mouth suggested that she knew just what he was thinking. He summoned his own smile back to his lips and aimed it at his hostess. "Have I your permission to see Lord Theron? For a moment only, of course: I do not wish to tire him."

Lady Sophia did not answer immediately, but studied Nicholas. It was not unlike Lord Arlen's attempts to fluster him, except for being oddly impersonal, as if Nicholas were a problem to be solved. He bore her scrutiny patiently, taking the opportunity to study Theron Campion's mother in return. She was handsome in a dark, foreign way, her black dress plain but well-cut, her thick hair braided artlessly around her head. Her only jewel was the massive ruby covering the first joint of her left forefinger like a glowing coal. Her black eyes were calm and direct.

"Very well," she said at last. "He might enjoy the company. But he is overtired. You understand?"

Nicholas nodded. "I will not keep him long. Your care for him does you credit."

"Poh," she said, and grinned suddenly. It made her look very like her son. "I am his mother, and a physician, and I am told I fuss too much. But not so much as Sly Davy, who thinks we must be protected from the world." She raised her voice. "Davy! You may come in now." The door opened with suspicious promptness. "Davy, please take this gentleman to a parlor and bring Lord Theron to him. And please don't listen at the door. I do not mind, but Lord Theron deserves his privacy."

Lady Jessica unfolded herself from the sofa and shook her costume straight. She was wearing a gauzy vest over a long shirt and loose trousers —Nicholas had never seen the like before, on man or woman.

"Nice, isn't it?" she said cheerfully. "My own design. I'll take temptation out of Davy's way, and fetch Theron for you myself." She grinned at the butler. "Put his lordship in the False Cabinet, will you, Davy? And then go give Helen a cuddle. I saw the butcher wink at her this morning." When Davy growled, she laughed and strode out the door.

Nicholas rose and bent punctiliously over his hostess' hand. It was strong and square and rough—a farm-wife's hand, except for the ruby. He

realized that he liked her. *This house is full of surprises,* Nicholas thought, and turned to follow Sly Davy.

It was an easy house to get lost in. On any other occasion, Nicholas would have been fascinated by its intricacies, but this morning, he was just impatient to get on with what promised to be an interesting interview. At last Davy showed him into a small room and kindly recommended him to make himself at home, since there was no telling where his lordship might have got himself to.

Lord Nicholas nodded and went to help himself to an apple from a large bowl of fruit. When it turned out to be wax, he tried to take a book from the shelves next to the hearth. The books were false spines, hiding a cabinet, he presumed, with a concealed latch. Intrigued, he poked and prodded, but soon lost patience. A bunch of violets was made of enamel, as was the porcelain teacup holding it. The malachite box on the mantelpiece was painted wood and the leopard's pelt thrown over the back of a chair was unshorn figured velvet. He had just pulled back curtains printed to look like watered silk to reveal a window-sized painting of a garden in high summer when the door opened and Lord Theron Campion entered the room.

He looked nervous. As well he might, Nicholas thought as he bowed and mouthed the standard opening platitudes. Campion did not take his part in the verbal pavane, simply nodding jerkily in acknowledgment. Neither did he come fully into the room, but clung to the door-handle, poised to bolt.

"Such an unusual room," Galing said after an awkward pause. "Nothing in it is what it seems to be."

Campion's face relaxed. "No. It isn't, is it? I can come in, then." He released the handle. "My sister tells me I have been rude." He smiled charmingly. "Again. I forgot your theatre party. Forgive me."

Galing gestured toward the open door. "Perhaps we could shut the door and discuss it?"

Alarm widened Campion's long eyes. "I don't think—"

A hennaed head appeared over the young nobleman's shoulder. "I'll send Davy with some wine or fruit if you'd like," Lady Jessica said cheerfully. "Everything here's wax and marble."

Her voice startled Campion, who leapt away from her and stood clutching a chair-back, wild-eyed. Galing, who would have given much for a glass of wine, remembered Sly Davy's habit of listening at doors and said, "No. Thank you."

"Right," said Jessica. "Have fun, boys." And she departed, pulling the door shut behind her. When he heard the latch fall, Campion started nervously and put his hand out to open it again.

"Leave it closed," said Galing sharply.

Campion spun around, his eyes wide, his mouth ajar, clearly panic-stricken. Overtired, indeed, Galing thought. Half mad was closer to the mark. With guilt, perhaps?

"I have brought you something." Galing used a slow, calm voice, a voice suitable for soothing horses. "A gift. But you may not like it. It is of a very personal nature."

"I am betrothed," Theron said breathlessly. "I am not in a position to accept that sort of gift."

"You mistake me, Lord Theron. It is—how shall I say? An offering. To your youth, your beauty—and your indiscretion."

"My—"

The young man's head was up, his nostrils sniffing the air, the very picture of the man with the deer's head in Ysaud's pictures. The image was so strong that Galing said aloud, despite himself, "Ah, now I see! You did give them to her after all."

"What?" Campion asked frantically. "What did I give, to whom? The necklace will be paid for. I've done nothing—"

It was the opening Nicholas had been angling for, though a little early in the game. Still, he seized the moment and moved in. "Ah, but you have, sir. You have done much this winter, with who knows what more to come."

Theron was backed up to the wall. He tried for a haughty look, succeeded only in looking wild-eyed. "You mistake me, sir, or else yourself."

"Do I? Hear me out, my lord, and tell me how much I mistake." It was potent, the young man's fear; he could smell it on the air, and he knew that he had stumbled upon something critical, something hidden, a secret Campion held that no one else must know. His terror at discovery was manifest; perhaps, like most criminals, he would be relieved to be rid of it.

"I know much already," Nicholas said reasonably. "Since MidWinter, there has been a series of incidents in the city: a hunt, a scandal, a challenge. And I think you are at the heart of them all."

At the word "hunt," Campion threw back his head and went very still.

"I know of the Companions of the King. I know of your lover at University. I know of his incautious lectures, and the odd enthusiasms of those who fall under his spell. Is that your excuse, my lord? That you were led astray by insidious teachings?"

The boy's eyes narrowed. "Get out. Leave this house."

"Oh, I don't think so; not yet. Not until I've given you my little gift."

Galing untied the laces of the flat leather case and brought out two of Ysaud's drawings. One showed Campion lying on his back with one arm curled up over his head and the other crossing the vine etched into his chest, echoing the relaxed curve of his legs and his sex. In the other, he was seated, rampant and hungry, reaching out toward the beholder as if in supplication.

Campion stared transfixed at these living images of his obsession with Ysaud, the blood flooding his gaunt cheeks. "I don't remember this. I did not pose for these."

"But effectively you did, my lord—for months, as I understand. The lady has a very quick eye."

"These are private. Studies for the paintings."

"Yes, the deer series. Magnificent work. I admired them deeply. I hear she's getting ready to show them, soon," he added for effect.

"She promised no one would know who they were."

"And indeed, no one will—unless they've seen the sketches."

Quick as thought, Campion snatched them from Nicholas's hand, tore them across, and flung them into the fire.

But the fire wasn't real either. Campion's hips and yearning face lay obscenely disjointed on the brightly painted embers.

"It wouldn't have helped," Galing said. "I have more."

Campion's mouth opened in a soundless *No*.

"I see the fact discomfits you. As well it might. What, after all, is to stop me from offering some to Lady Genevieve as a betrothal gift?"

Campion fixed his bright, strained gaze on Nicholas's face. "Why?" he whispered.

"Why?" Nicholas shrugged. "I'd do it to prevent the alliance of a noblewoman with a traitor who seeks to overthrow all we hold dear."

"I'm not a traitor."

"Then what are you? A brawler and a whore? A man who always manages to be just where a nest of traitors is talking of kings and ancient rights? And if they triumph, who will then be king, my lord? A Northern farmer's son, a scrawny scribe with blue fingers and inkstains? Or a descendant of the last of the kings, the noble heir to Tremontaine?"

Galing wiped his brow. It was the speech he still dreamed of making to Arlen, the true vision he had of how the pieces fit together. It was a blessed relief to have someone to say it to, someone who knew the truth as he did.

"You're mad," Campion said.

"That," said Galing, "is very rich, coming from you. You are shaking so hard you can barely stand. Tell me what you know."

Ostentatiously, he sat himself down in a chair that looked like stone, gesturing Campion toward its mate. Instead, Campion went to the false book shelves and pulled on a spine titled *Wines of the South*, The shelves sprung open on an array of bottles. He poured himself a whiskey, not offering Nicholas any. But neither, Nicholas noted, did he drink it himself.

"Look," said Galing soothingly, "you're young. Youth will have its pleasures. And its enthusiasms. I don't want to ruin your marriage. Or your future. Indeed, I seek to promote a happy resolution of them both. If you will confess the plot to me, I will see to it that your name is never linked to it. My word on it."

"There is no plot."

"There is. I know it. If you were a common man, I'd have you thrown into the Chop and tortured until you confessed. As it is…" Nicholas tapped his portfolio. "I will surely draw your fangs and leave you toothless, brideless, and a mockery to all the city. You may seek your kingship then wherever you can find someone who will not laugh himself into stitches over your horns and your hooves and your rather extensive personal decorations."

Campion pushed back his hair with both hands, rubbed his temples as though they hurt him, and swung his head low, from side to side. The effect was disturbing. "What must I do? How shall I prove myself to you?"

"Write it down," Galing said. "I will have it all from you—your dealings with the King's Companions, your relations with St Cloud, who your allies are and what they hope from you. Give me a clear account, with all your part in it. When that is in my hands, you shall have the sketches in yours. Not before."

"Ysaud," the boy said miserably. "Did she give them to you?"

Galing almost felt sorry for him. He was such a pathetic creature after all, for a rebellion to pin its hopes upon. "Only upon compulsion," he said contemptuously. "She will not play the same trick twice, never fear. I am the only one who knows; and, if you are a good friend to the city, I will remain the only one. You will marry your sweetheart, and inherit your duchy. You will even sit in Council and enjoy the social rounds and summer on your country estates. Most people would not object to such a fate."

"Please go," the boy said. "I cannot bear the smell of you."

"Thank you," said Galing. "It has been a pleasure."

JUST FOR DIVERSION, JESSICA CAMPION WAS PRICING the tapestries in her father's room. She had not been in it since she'd attended his deathbed, and she wanted to see if they were as good as she remembered, or if the occasion had caused her to overvalue them.

She remembered staring at the woven pictures as she and the old duke played chess; sometimes he'd fall asleep, and she would sit patiently, silently making inventory, testing her fledgling knowledge of the world's goods: the paintings and fine fabrics, the carvings and silver that furnished the room. Yes, indeed—she inspected the back—the tapestries were Ardish work, from one of the great studios. She had a client who would surely want them, if Sophia were inclined to sell. Jessica snorted. Fat chance. The room was a shrine to the dead duke. Sophia would probably sell her last gown and wear the tapestries before she'd part with a single one of them.

Riverside House made Jessica jumpy—not because her father had died there, but because she had grown up in it. Of course, the duke had not been living in it then. He'd decamped shortly after her birth, gone off to the island of Kyros with one of his famous lovers. She remembered them both together, in the white house above the blue sea, the summer she had

been sent to visit. She was eight. He wanted to see his daughter. The Duchess Katherine had bundled her off with her nurse, who had gotten very friendly with the sailors. Jessica had climbed a rigging, and they said she was a natural. She'd decided then and there she'd have her own ship someday. She told Marcus so when she got back, and she reminded him of it when she turned sixteen and dowries were discussed.

"I don't want a husband," she said, "and I never will. Katherine hasn't got one; why should I?"

Characteristically blunt, Katherine answered, "Because the city isn't going to put up with you running through its daughters until you're fifty. We're offering to get you settled now, before you create so much scandal that even money won't buy you into a decent family."

Jessica did not like to remember exactly what she'd said then; it had been coarse, without finesse. She'd learned a lot since then about getting people to do what she wanted. But the upshot was that she left the city on someone else's ship, with stake in the cargo and a few trinkets to sell abroad—trinkets she hoped Katherine had never missed. She'd always thought she'd stop someday at Kyros, see how the old man was getting on. But she'd never managed to route herself that way. There wasn't really much on the island but honey and ruins and goats and olives.

She found her father again back home in Riverside, anyway, lying in this room, transparent with illness, easily bored, still with a tongue on him, though, the terror of his physicians. She was twenty years old, Theron's age now, almost. She wondered what the old duke would have made of his son. Strange that they'd never even seen each other. But that was men for you—men, and death, she reflected, to be fair.

There was the ivory swordsman she had brought her father, still on the chest by the bed. She picked it up, and Theron walked in.

Well, not walked, exactly. Burst. Stormed. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

She only looked at him. That usually worked.

"I've been searching the house for you! Davy said you'd not gone out."

"Nor had I. Or does this room somehow count as out?"

With one of his peculiar lightning shifts, he looked at the ivory in her hand and said brightly, "Ah! Adding to your hoard?"

She said, “Theron, sit down. Or at least stop pacing. You are welcome to count the silver when I leave, but please wait until then, all right?”

He stopped still, saying blankly, “What?”

She couldn’t figure him out. Sophia said it was wedding nerves, and that he was high-strung. Sophia, of course, did not know about the incident with the knives in the tanner’s yard. Jessica was saving it in case it should prove useful later. Knowing Theron, there was probably more where that came from. He was a Campion, after all.

“Never mind,” she said. “Just tell me what you—Oh!” She thought it through. The pattern began to emerge. “It was that man, wasn’t it? Stupid of me. The one who just left—Galing, right? He said something to you, did something to set you off—the pictures, right? The dirty ones? He showed you—No, wait, you wouldn’t need me for that. So they must have been—Oh, no. Oh, Theron, no.”

“No, what?”

“No, tell me you didn’t pose for some dirty pictures which Galing now has his hands on and is trying to blackmail you with.”

Eyes wide as a child’s, he nodded. “But not—not exactly. I mean, it wasn’t exactly like that.” He told her about Ysaud. Halfway through, she began to laugh. Furious, he ripped open his collar, showed her the leaves etched into his skin. Here in this room, it sobered her up. “You should not have let someone mark you like that,” she said. “Not you, Theron.”

“Don’t you find it beautiful?” he asked defiantly. “She is a great artist.”

“Slaves are marked like that,” his sister said grimly. “In places where I’ve been, slaves are marked with patterns cut in their skin, as other people’s property.” He raised his head, shook it as if shaking off some binding. “All right,” she said, “it’s the stupidity of youth; thank heaven none of mine left visible marks. I understand about the artist. Now, what does Galing want?”

Theron pulled his jacket tight about himself. “He wants me to confess to treason.”

Jessica sighed. “You *have* been busy. And you were such a nice little boy.”

“But I didn’t!” the nice little boy cried. “He came here with some mad tale of conspiracy, University, the kingship—Oh, Jess.” For the first time since he’d come into the room, he looked at her clear-eyed, direct, as if he finally recognized her. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Treason sounds serious, Theron. Tell Katherine.”

"No!" He shook his head violently and actually pawed the ground with his foot. "No, she mustn't know. She'd probably believe him, not me. She's already turned me with a haying fork from this field to next…It's all her fault, really. I *had* to get married, to get her off my back! I don't think she cares who I marry, as long as it makes me look harmless and gets me out of the city for a while. That's how bad it is with her."

His half-sister nodded in complete sympathy. "Well, then, let's think. This Galing—what's his interest? Will he take money?"

"I don't think so. He didn't ask for money. He wants a full confession—a *report*, he called it."

"Why don't you just make something up?"

Again, the violent headshake. "I cannot—there are others. People at University he wants me to accuse."

"Charming man. And when you fail to deliver, he sends your sketches to the Randalls?"

"So he said."

"Let him."

"*What?*"

"Let him. Who cares?"

"But the disgrace! And I'm not a traitor, Jess. Those men he wants me to accuse, they've done nothing. I cannot have this creature triumph over me!" Theron blew air out through his flared nostrils, shaking his head again in that disquieting way. "To think he holds me in his hands—to think of him—oh, God—*looking* at me, those pictures—"

"Ahhh." She studied her half-brother, the heir to Tremontaine. He revealed more of his heart than he knew; he always had. But, then, there always had been someone standing by to wrap it in warm blankets at the least sign of a chill. Even now that he'd been betrayed by his mistress and by a fellow nobleman, he didn't seem to recognize betrayal as the human condition. He probably wasn't as innocent as he claimed, either. He'd done *something* to get both Katherine and Galing roused. If she helped him, she'd be helping to perpetuate his illusion: that mistakes could be rectified; that people were kind; that he would always be loved.

And he would be in her debt. Well, let it be his problem. For herself, Jessica was beginning to see a very neat, very amusing, maybe even profitable piece of business. She said, "What do you want me to do?"

"Get the sketches back from Galing, of course."

"But you said he wouldn't take money."

He looked confused, as she'd intended. Delicately, he persisted: "You have a certain renown for finding and acquiring works of art—by your own stratagems."

"Steal them? From Lord whosis Galing?" She played out the outrage, then relented: "Come on, Theron. He'd only get more from Ysaud."

"They must all be found—found and burned."

"Oh, hardly. Hardly that. I acquire art, I don't destroy it. I've got a much, much better idea." But she wouldn't say what it was, only, "It'll be fun. And it will get everyone what they want—except Galing, of course. And… maybe, the Randalls. I can't guarantee you the Randalls."

When he said nothing, she took his chin in her hand and turned his face to hers. "Theron. You understand what I'm saying? You've asked for my help, and I will give it. But I may be giving you help you don't know you need." She looked at him for a long time. Her eyes were the same green as his own, as their father's in the portrait. "Say yes, Theron. Say that you understand and accept my help—or things will go very ill between us."

"I understand," he whispered. "But do not disgrace me, sister."

"You worry too much," she said, "about disgrace. This is an old, old city, and ours is an old, old family. It's like a splash of blood on the sea, your disgrace—quickly absorbed and forgotten. But I will not disgrace you, if you try not to disgrace yourself."

JESSICA DRESSED HERSELF CAREFULLY, IN RICH COLORS that showed off her tawny skin. She braided a strand of tiger-eye through the coils of her blazing hair and lined her eyes with kohl and put gold in her ears. Then she hired a chair to take her to the home of the artist, Ysaud.

"Lady Jessica Campion of Tremontaine," she announced herself to the servant who answered the door, and Ysaud did not keep her waiting long.

The artist was small and perfect, with regular features and pale, dark-lashed eyes. Jessica's mouth watered.

"There are so many Tremontaines," Ysaud said. "Which hole did you crawl out of?"

"A very special one." Jessica smiled. "As you will see. I hear that you have pictures of my brother Theron."

The artist had to tilt her head up to view Jessica's face. "You look like him. A little. Come into the light. You are very much older. Are you sure you're not his mother?"

Jessica smiled wickedly. "Quite, quite sure." Their two faces were almost touching. Ysaud's eyes marked every fine line the sun had etched in Jessica's skin, even the down on her upper lip. She said, "I would draw your face as a landscape, I think, all peaks and soft valleys and unexpected ridges."

"I've seen that place, somewhere out past the Ardish Straits. There was a wicked wind, but it's a land well worth visiting."

"Is it? I am much occupied here."

"Drawing people. I know. Let me see your hands," Jessica said, and Ysaud gave her one. "Just as I thought. You don't take care of them properly." She smoothed the fingers, one by one, from base to tip, gently, with her own. "I knew a woman once, a sculptor…she never did anything but work, in clay and dust and marble…and her skin, it dried right up, and cracked—right there…" Her tongue marked the spot. "She could barely hold her chisel." She traced the route to the wrist. "It was very sad."

Ysaud's free hand caressed the strand of tiger-eye, following it through the coils of Jessica's hair. "Clearly, you should have warned her sooner."

"It is an error I endeavor to correct." Jessica took the hand she held, and moved it to the high neck of her silk chemise, laced with a bronze ribbon. "Pull," she said.

"What will I get out of it?"

"Nothing much. There are still all the buttons."

Ysaud laughed, and pulled—and pulled some more, bringing the thin, mocking lips to her own and kissing them crimson, biting them a rich vermilion.

"Take me to your studio," Jessica urged.

"Why?" the artist asked, amused; "you want to see my pictures?"

"Not a bit," Jessica murmured. "I want to see you naked, where you work."

"I want to see you naked, in my bed."

"We can have that, too. Why not? There's a whole night ahead of us. Maybe a nice kitchen table, too…"

JESSICA CAME AWAKE IN ROSE SATIN SHEETS, TO THE smell of burning wax. Candles were all around the bed. Ysaud was tracing their shadows on her skin with one fingertip, which Jessica bit.

Ysaud said, "You want the Theron pictures, don't you?"

"Sight unseen?" Jessica mocked. "I know you're good, but it's a big investment."

"Don't you?" the artist insisted.

"Of course. But only for one night."

"You don't have much staying power, then."

"Oh, do I not?"

And when the conversation resumed, Jessica said in a dreamy voice, "Theron never mentioned me, did he? Of course not. You didn't know he had a sister. You must understand who I am. The actress's bastard. Tremontaine hates me. The duchess was forced to take me in when I was a baby, to avoid a scandal. When I got to be too much trouble as a young woman, she shipped me off abroad, where I have fended for myself as best I could. In twenty years, I haven't done badly."

"Why are you here now, then?"

"The wedding." Jessica smiled thinly. "It's their great triumph, you see. Their beloved Theron, married to a great noble's daughter, father of a whole new crop of legitimate heirs. They want me to witness it."

"And you came? How—tame of you."

"The wedding," said Jessica, fingering Ysaud's navel, "is not for some months."

"Leaving you plenty of time to celebrate your brother's future happiness—no, don't stop."

"Leaving me plenty of time to ensure my own. And while this"—she kissed a rosy nipple—"is making me very happy, indeed, the long-term prospect takes a little more effort."

"*And* my pictures."

"Among other things."

"You are planning to expose Lord Theron and destroy his marriage."

"Among other things."

"For revenge?"

"Among other things."

Ysaud chuckled, then gasped at the sensations shooting through her, then chuckled again. "The pictures," she said, "are not immediately recognizable as Lord Theron. Not, at any rate, with his clothes on."

"Then I will have to contrive to have him pose naked next to your favorite one, won't I?"

Ysaud shuddered deliciously again. "Not necessary. I have sketches for the paintings which are unmistakable."

"Now, those I would like to buy. I have clients abroad who are collectors."

"Of smut?"

"Lady, of your work. Have I not told you how deeply I admire it, how honored I am to be received into your…presence?"

"In fact, you have not."

"I am deeply…so very deeply…"

THE GRAY LIGHT OF DAWN WAS FILTERING THROUGH all the nine high windows of Ysaud's studio. "They are magnificent," Jessica said, staring at the canvases. "I could sell these easily in Tabor or in Elysia…"

"I wish you would." Ysaud flipped back another cover cloth. "I can't sell them here; they're too incendiary. I've already had one visit from a spy of the Council. He got all excited; I had to buy him off with a few of these." She flipped the sheaf of sketches. "I tell you what, Jessica: give me seventy-five royals for the lot, paintings and all, and you can do whatever you want with them."

"Make it fifty."

Ysaud looked at her. "I need the money. You'll easily double it. No, you take them, sell them abroad, make a nice profit, and I'll be washed clean of the whole episode, with money in my purse. Enchanting as you Campions are, you're also damnably distracting."

"I take it that's my dismissal for the day?"

"Oh, for the year, I think. You're a bit rich for my blood. And you've gotten what you came for."

"I've enjoyed it," said Jessica Campion.

She went whistling out into the street—a deplorable habit, to be sure—and took herself down to a Riverside tavern, the only place where the old Duke Tremontaine's daughter could be sure of getting a really solid breakfast and not be disturbed, while sporting a string of tiger-eyes around her waist.

JESSICA WAS STILL AFRAID OF KATHERINE, THOUGH. And so she deemed it politic to send her a letter:

Dear Cousin,

You asked me once to turn all my gifts to serving the family, and I refused you. I have been happy with my choice. And grateful to you for giving me the means to set up in life. I'm going to express my gratitude in the next few weeks by causing a scandal of no mean proportions, which will embarrass you greatly. But it will come out all right in the end. I am telling you this now only because I don't want you to suffer or to think that I would really do anything to harm you or Sophia or Theron. It will, however, look as if I am, and so if I were you I'd go to the country and not come back til it's over. And by the way I need a lot of money, 150 royals or so for now. If you were a client I'd ask for much more, but I am serving the family and will not see immediate profit; it's all for expenses.

She chewed on the end of her pen, and finally wrote, *Your loving daughter,* and crossed it out—Katherine had been as a mother to her for all of one day before turning her over to a series of nurses—*Your devoted cousin, Jessica.*

chapter IV

TWO DAYS AFTER HIS VISIT TO LORD THERON Campion in Riverside found Lord Nicholas Galing a prey to doubt. After an unprofitable morning spent pacing the floor of this study and replaying in his mind what he had said to Lord Theron and what Lord Theron had said to him, Nicholas put on a coat of leaf-green and went to Lord Filisand's.

Despite the bright and beckoning weather, Lord Filisand's stuffy rooms were not thin of company. Spring in the city brought not only unfurling leaves and flowers in the gardens of the Hill, but also the Spring Sessions and the joint meeting of the Council of Nobles and the City Magistrates. As Nicholas threaded his way through the little knots of men in the greater salon, he overheard snippets of discussions on taxes, on the leather monopoly, on the rivermen's objections to the new storage tariffs—dull topics to one who had been sailing the deep waters of treason and intrigue.

"There you are, Galing." It was Lord Condell, sleek and graceful as a cat, with sapphire clips in his soft, fair hair. He tapped Nicholas on the wrist with his fan. "Have you heard the latest? The Tremontaine bastard's back in town—Jessica, the lady pirate."

Nicholas would have liked to astonish him by announcing that he had just been speaking to the lady, but discretion prevailed. "No!" he exclaimed, all polite incredulity. "Where is she living? She's not at Tremontaine House, I suppose."

"That's the thing," said Condell. "She's rented a house—a considerable house—on Albans Street on the Lower Hill."

"Not Lady Caroline's Folly?"

"The same. Ballroom, conservatory, stables and all. What do you think of that, eh?"

Nicholas beckoned to a footman carrying a tray, chose a leafy green roll and bit into it. Something was up. Two days ago, Jessica had looked very much at home at Riverside. Had she quarreled with Lady Sophia?

"Everyone knows there's no love lost between her and Duchess Katherine," Condell was saying. "Depend on it, this is some scheme to bedevil the poor woman."

Nicholas swallowed. "Or else she's simply decided to come home and settle down," he said in a bored drawl. "Surely pirating, if that's what she does, is a young man's—er, woman's—game."

Condell snapped open his fan. "Are those any good?"

"What? Oh, the lettuce rolls." Nicholas took another and held it out to the older man. "Very tender and fresh—an embodiment of Spring, in fact. Do try one."

Condell peered doubtfully at the crisp green roll. "I like my food cooked," he said. "She deals in art—figurines from Elysia and tapestries from Ardith—that sort of thing. She has a ship, sails everywhere, with a crew of women, it's said. A real virago. I can't see her settling down."

"Well," said Nicholas, sick to death of Campions, "time will tell. In the meantime, what do you make of Filisand's new protégé? Think he's grooming him for the Crescent's staff?"

LATER THAT WEEK, LORD NICHOLAS GALING returned home from his tailor's to find a large square envelope, addressed to him in an ornate secretarial hand, lying in creamy splendor on his hall table. Opening it, he found an invitation from Lady Jessica Campion, begging the pleasure of his company at a soiree the following evening. The occasion was a suite of paintings by the artist Ysaud, which Lady Jessica wished to display in her native city before packing them off to grace the court of an (unnamed) foreign monarch.

Nicholas turned the invitation over. On the back were scrawled the following words: *I invite you at my brother's urging. He says to tell you that he has something to give you. J.C.*

WAITING FOR A LITTLE KING TO REACH HIS MOMENT of trial is among the greatest trials a wizard must himself face. In a way, it is the wizard's test as much as the Little King's, testing his skill in reading the demands of the time, the ability of his candidate, the needs of the Land. For in the end, the Land chooses the king it needs to serve it.

Basil St Cloud spent this time of waiting as his predecessors had passed it before him: in study. He was, he feared, a weak wizard, and most woefully unprepared. He'd had no magister to teach him, no colleagues with whom to dispute and discuss the theory of transformations, the signs of omen, the mysteries of grove and pool. All he had was the voices of the past, the voices of the dead speaking to him through the documents, the legends and the histories he'd been living amongst these past weeks. These, and his dreams, gave him an inkling of what he must do to bring the Land alive again.

Among all his questions, certain facts stood clear. The Fall had cleansed the Land of false kings, of false magic. Basil's dreams were of an older time: of the grove and the knife, the bearskin and the cup, the deer and the hunt. The Book spoke to him more and more clearly, telling him what to do. He was heir to what the Land had lost. If Theron was mad, it was as it should be. All the true kings were mad. If only Basil studied well, he might yet gain the final knowledge to master this Little King. Together, they would complete the circle and renew the ancient promise.

Meanwhile, he had a book to write, a debate to hold, a challenge to maintain. He did not fear Roger Crabbe; Crabbe was like the false mages of his own imagining: ruthless, ambitious, and utterly without truth. Crabbe was a charlatan. Basil had all the proof of real magic he needed, in his own power and the Book of the King's Wizard. But the Book was too precious to be paraded before a crowd of gawking skeptics. He would hide what he had become from his fellows as long as he could; he would clothe the truth in language they could understand, the language of logic and scholarship. When they heaped him with praises, bestowed honors upon him…then he could sit secure and work what he knew into the fabric of reality. They might not even know he was doing it. But he would know, and the Land would know. And Theron, his false true lover, Theron would surely know.

So he sat in the Archives late into the night, long after the librarian, who was old and trusting, had left him with instructions to lock up after

himself when he was done and leave the key above the door. The Book lay open before him. He had brought it for a purpose, and he opened for a second time to *A Spelle to Un-Cover Hidden Trothes*. Speaking it, Basil felt how weak and halting had been his first attempt. He still did not understand the words, but as he uttered them, they sang along his bones and echoed in his heart, an intimate and well-loved part of him.

When he'd finished, he stood and walked along one of the narrow lanes dividing the long banks of shelves. He reached up his hand and found a plain wooden box, tied up with black tape and very grimy. Within the box were yellowed documents, bundled and tied. They were from the time of the last king, letters to a University librarian, one Carrington. Most of them concerned matters of great interest to a scholar of the history of the University in the last years of the monarchy, but no use to Basil. Except one.

He knew it as soon as he laid his hand on it, before he'd unfolded its crackling yellow pages and squinted at the spiky, archaic hand. He glanced at the signature, then read it through, his heart beating faster as his eyes scanned the glorious, damning text. This was the proof he needed. All he had to do was go up before the Governors and the Doctors, the Fellows and Scholars of the University and show them this letter and Crabbe would be effectively and efficiently silenced before he could open his mouth.

Basil St Cloud sighed and folded the letter up again. Doing that would win the debate straight off, but it would do very little to demonstrate the superiority of St Cloud's methods over Crabbe's. There was that to think of, too: he wasn't only a fledgling wizard, he was a Doctor of the University, whose skills should be enough on their own. He longed to test the edifice of scholarship he had built over the past weeks against the academic rocks Crabbe was preparing to fling against it. He wanted to win; but he wanted to win by his own skills of persuasion and argument.

Briskly, he tucked the letter into the sleeve of his gown and laid the other papers carefully back into their wooden coffer. A debate that ends before it begins is no debate at all. He'd present his argument as he'd constructed it. If Crabbe found a way to refute it, he'd trump him with this letter and take the debate and the Horn Chair in a single definitive move.

When Basil reached up to tuck the library key above the door, the Book, heavy in his sleeve, bumped against his chest. What did the Horn Chair

matter anyway? Or the debate, except as a prelude to the binding of the king and the waking of the Land? But Basil had been a scholar before he was a wizard, and to the scholar in him, the debate did matter. He was right, he had always been right, and he owed it to the men who followed him, the men who looked to him to lead them down new paths in the careful quest for truth, to prove to them that he was right. The Book did not change that. And then the Land would wake to a world of men who saw things clearly, who trusted their own intelligence, their skills of reasoning and observation. It would be a new world.

chapter V

GALING WAS NOT THE FIRST OF LADY JESSICA'S guests to arrive. Even those with little interest in the Campion family or in modern art were curious to see what she had made of Lady Caroline's Folly in three days.

She certainly had not furnished it, which would have taken a warehouse full of massive tables and cabinets. She'd contented herself with a few necessary pieces: a very fine carpet in the entrance hall and a comfortable sofa and a long mirror in the small side room where the ladies left their cloaks. She'd scattered lighted tapers lavishly through the cavernous rooms, where they coaxed the best from the frescoes and inlays with which Lady Caroline had decorated her walls. The effect was kind to cracking paint and buckling wood. It was generally agreed among the older guests that the place hadn't looked so impressive since it was new.

The hostess herself stood at the head of the stairs, greeting people as they entered her hall. She, too, was impressive. Her purple gown should have clashed with the bright russet of her hennaed hair, but instead they seemed to lend one another fire. Her underskirt was of turquoise silk, woven in a curious foreign pattern; her lace trim was of gold, and gold hung from her ears and about her neck. "Showy," Lady Nevilleson murmured, and "Magnificent," breathed her husband.

Inside the salon, her guests' palates were teased with pickled cherries and roasted goose livers and purple wine that tasted of foreign sunlight. As Cecily Halliday later said to her husband, whatever one thought of it as a whole, it was an evening whose component parts one would be very sorry to have missed.

Those present could not help but remark on who had and had not been invited. No city merchants, bankers, not even other art collectors; only the nobility, it seemed, and of them, almost exclusively men who sat on the Council of Lords and their wives. It was early enough in the evening that they were all on their way to other engagements, to the first balls of the spring season, or to theatre and supper parties. The artist Ysaud was not in evidence, nor were any other members of the Tremontaine clan: not the Duchess Katherine, the Dowager Duchess Sophia, nor her son, Lord Theron—not even the various Talbert nephews and cousins.

"Perhaps they've been given a private showing," Lord Condell muttered to Davy Tyrone. "I do hope Ysaud turns up at this charming fair, she's better than a juggler with knives."

"I think," his friend said, "you'll find Lady Jessica entertainment enough. One hears she robbed the Marquis of Carabas of his grandfather's diamond ring, and sold it as a love charm to the Emperor of Tierce—a *love* charm, mind you!"

"Oh, dear. I had best look to my purse," Condell said. "Are those candied *quinces*? Pray get me some. Look, there's Galing—I know he likes them, too."

LADY CAROLINE'S FOLLY CAME COMPLETE WITH A paneled library, and it was there that Theron sat among the scattered volumes, awaiting what was to

come. Jessica had said, "You've nothing to do but stay right here; don't come out until I tell you to, no matter what. If Galing wants to see you, I'll send him in."

He stared at the bowl of fruit on the table: hothouse grapes, and some apples. They had neglected to leave him a knife; or perhaps she did not want him to have one. There was also a carafe of watered wine.

He could hear music, and voices. They were gathering, his people, in the house. His sister had summoned them. But they did not know of his hiding place. The hunter could not find him, could not smell him, could not see him where he rested amongst the leaves of all the books.

He curled into the cushioned chair by the library table, and fell into an uneasy doze. There the bear-man found Theron, whose hair was braided in two-and-twenty braids, tied off with jewels and bits of polished bone.

"My lord." The bear-man did not touch him, but Theron could feel his breath, hot as sun on earth. "Why do you hide from your people? Come out, and let them do you proper homage."

Theron shook his horn-branched head. "They will not do homage to this."

"Truly. You have run in this form for far too long. One wonders if you are king at all. The proper rites have not been observed. You led the hunt in your own shape, and now you cannot rule yourself in this one. I fear the time of trial is at an end." From the fur of his cloak, he drew forth a knife, dully gleaming stone, with an edge like an animal's tooth. "Rise, Little King, and kneel to me; bare your throat, and give your power back to the Land."

"No!" Theron tried to fling up his hands, but he stood trembling in deer form; his hands were hooves, planted on the ground beneath him.

The bear narrowed yellow eyes. "Then will you run?"

"I have run," Theron said. "I have been hunter and hunted. I have a deer's horns and a man's heart. And I have the Blood of Kings."

"Yes," the bear growled. "That is a beginning."

"Where, then, shall I run?"

"Why, to the grove," the wizard said, handing him the knife of stone. It was cold as death in his hand. "Run to the sacred grove, where oak and holly ring the pool—where you may know whether you shall live to take up kingship, or die to feed the Land." He struck the deer a blow on the haunch: "Run!"

Theron awoke with his heart pounding, his breath coming in quick, tight gasps. The room was squeezing the life out of him. He dashed to the window, flung open the casement and breathed in the sharp, cold air. Above, the stars pricked glittering patterns in the sky. The rooftops of the city gleamed in their light. There was no footing for him on the slate of the rooftops—no escape for him other than through the forbidden door.

THEY ALL CALLED HER "LADY" JESSICA BECAUSE THAT was how she had styled herself on the invitation; those who would refuse her the courtesy title would also have scorned the invitation. But the older ones there remembered Jessica Campion as a girl. The women, particularly, recalled visits to Tremontaine House, and a fox-faced child who could be coaxed to sit on their laps with offers of sweets.

The ancient and delectable Lady Godwin kissed both her cheeks. "Jessica, my dear. You quite put me in mind of your mother, standing there. You have her stature, the way she dominated the stage. Do you ever engage in theatricals, my dear?"

"As often as I can, dear Lady Godwin. How good of you to come."

Lord Philip Montague bowed deeply over her hand. "Congratulations, Lady Jessica." He was a collector, and had canceled another engagement to come to this viewing. "A year of Ysaud's work, one hears, and not yet seen by any of us. Generous of you to share it with us before it all goes off to—where did you say it was going?"

Jessica looked him in the eye. "To a foreign monarch, my lord."

"Just so. I didn't know you dealt in canvas; I thought bibelots and jewels were more your line."

"They're easier to transport, certainly. But I hate to disappoint my clients."

"Oh, indeed. And we do appreciate it, as you know. That jade carving you sent me has pride of place in my summer home. Ysaud's work, though, is a particular favorite of mine. Should I see any paintings tonight that I really cannot live without, I hope that your monarch will not be disappointed if his cache is a few pounds lighter?"

"I really cannot answer for him, sir."

"I am prepared to be generous." He cocked his fair head, birdlike, waiting confidently for her answer.

"Of course you are," she said affably. "Well, go on and see them, then. Don't be distracted by the food, though; just walk past it through the double doors to the octagonal ballroom." She turned to the next guest. "Can it be Lady Herriot? This is not fancy dress, yet I could swear you are masquerading as your own daughter!"

Having gorged himself on quinces to his heart's delight, Lord Condell had attached himself and Tyrone to Lord Nicholas Galing. "And where, dear Nicholas, are you off to after this?" Condell asked.

"Well, if you must know, and I suppose you must," Galing drawled, "for there is no keeping secrets from you, Condell; as well try to hide a bit of candied quince that's got stuck between one's front teeth!" and he had the pleasure of watching his friend surreptitiously try to find out if he did. "I have a little *assignation* this evening, not far from here."

"That," Tyrone said, "explains the beribboned package you carry?"

Galing gave the flat parcel under his arm a little hug. "Precisely. I would not want it to go astray. So you'll understand if I survey the artwork and vanish."

"Perfectly," Condell smirked. "Then let us proceed into the room where it hangs. Historical paintings, are they not? Very educational, no doubt. I myself always believe—Good god!"

At his side, Tyrone murmured, "Who would have guessed that history could be so exciting?"

They were staring at powerful images of a naked man, his body washed blue in the moonlight, dappled by midday leaf and shade, or licked by the light of flames.

It was the underside of all the fusty images you found in old carvings and stained glass panels: the kneeling deer, the horned king, the deer-headed man; they had all seen the formal representations a hundred times. Ysaud's paintings were a dream of those things, raw and vivid as a nightmare, or a scene remembered out of childhood.

The images were everywhere, up and down the walls of the salon, on canvases large as the walls themselves and small as the pages of a book.

When they had stared for some time, Tyrone observed, "It's all the same man."

"Is it?" asked Condell, entranced.

"Certainly. Observe the arms, the turn of the leg. And the neck—when it's not covered in fur. What's that on his chest?"

"Leaves, I think." Condell leaned in closer. "No, they're painted—meant to be marked directly on the skin, I mean; see the way they crease here, and the shadow? What a pretty pattern. Perhaps I should have it done myself."

"Perhaps you should." Tyrone stepped back. "This is a year's work, this is. She painted someone for a year—"

"Indeed she did," Condell drawled, "and not so long ago. And I know who. What do you think, Galing?"

"I think," said Galing, "that if I were that man, I would be very displeased by this night's work. Was Lady Randall invited, do you know?"

"I don't. But I do think someone should tell her about it. Are you her particular friend, Galing?"

"Not yet," said Nicholas.

They heard a curious sound behind them: a sort of collective sigh from the group of people who had just entered, all struck dumb, all gazing at the vision that surrounded them.

"One hears," Condell murmured, "that our hostess has quarreled with her family. That is old news—now fully reconstituted, like a slice of dried apple soaked in very potent wine. I would now raise that 'quarrel' to a declaration of war."

Around them, the room was erupting into a frantic buzz. Condell added, "I am so glad we decided to come."

JESSICA WAITED UNTIL THE NOISE WAS LOUD ENOUGH TO signify that speculation was in full cry. Then she signaled to a footman to call for silence. She stood just inside the doors. Purple and turquoise and crimson and gold, she was a work of art in her own right, and those with a taste for history might have remembered the ancient Southern queens who led armies in royal chariots draped with silk.

"My lords, my ladies." She pitched her voice to carry melodiously into the eight corners of the room. "Noble friends. You all honor me with your presence this evening. I have been absent from my native city for many

years. In that time, you have maintained the well-being of our land. You have nourished it with your sons and your daughters, your tears and your laughter, your toil and your watchful care. My thanks I offer, most inadequately, in the display of these pictures, this complete work of genius that renders the ancient soul of our country for all to see. After tonight, they will be gone, so I beg you to look your fill, and to accept the offering in the spirit of thanks with which it is meant."

There was a smattering of applause. Jessica smiled. "A moment ago, I called you 'friends.' And it is as friends that I make bold to speak to you now. The work you see around you celebrates our country's past with the handiwork of the present, and I believe it will resound to our honor long into the future." Murmurs, now, of approbation. "The past," she went on, "can be a source of glory. And it can be a source of shame, but only if we let it be. For what are we, friends, if we cannot rewrite the past by creating a present glory that eclipses it and shines forth the way to an even nobler future?"

"Right!" someone shouted. It was not Galing. He was watching with mute fascination as Jessica held out her hand and took from a servant a heavy piece of folded paper, marked with a seal that could be Tremontaine's. Lord Theron was not here. The woman was clearly poisonous, bent on bringing her half-brother down, or at least on humiliating him. Was this paper his report, his confession of treachery? And was she going to read it aloud, here, now, to the assembled nobles of the city, in the presence of the paintings that exposed him to gossip and ridicule? Galing closed his eyes a moment. She was not, as far as he knew, working for the Serpent Chancellor. But then, he knew so little of Arlen's plots and games.

Jessica spoke again. "What is the past? For me, it has been a thing of shame. You know of my father, David Alexander Tielman Campion, Duke Tremontaine. You know how I was born of his dalliance with an actress revered in the theatres of this city as the Black Rose. This is the past, this is my shame, though you are kind enough to overlook it, and to treat it as none." There were sympathetic murmurs from a few women.

"I wonder," Jessica said, "how you will feel when I show you this?"

She lifted up the paper, and held it high. She really did look like a queen in a play.

"I hope that you will welcome it and me among you as warmly as you always have."

Galing's eyes were riveted, waiting for her signal to him that it was time to come forth. She knew he was here; she'd greeted him cordially, and whispered to him not to leave until they had taken care of business. By which he'd thought she meant until she had produced Theron. Now, he thought he understood that she meant him to produce the sketches and finish her night's work.

"We cannot change the past," Jessica went on, "but we can reinvent it. Rediscover it, give new meaning to old actions, and uncover hidden truths. And thereby forge a new future, free of shame. And so with pride and joy I tell you, my friends, lords and ladies of this noble realm: I hold in my hand the secret marriage vows made between my father, the Duke Tremontaine, and his love, the Black Rose—sealed with his own seal, and dated six months before my own birth."

Pandemonium.

Nicholas found that he was crushing the edge of the portfolio. The treacherous bitch. He didn't for a minute think the "marriage lines" were real, but it didn't matter, did it? She could have Tremontaine tied up in the courts for years on this one, if she pursued it and the family denied it. What use would the Randalls have for their bridegroom now? His inheritance insecure, his last lover—no, make that his last lover but one—a resurrected scandal…And so what power did Galing have left over the mad, treasonous, scheming, lecherous young noble?

"My lord." Galing did not look up. There were so many lords here. But the servant gently touched his sleeve. "My lord of Galing. Please come with me."

Jessica was in the middle of a crowd of well-wishers. "I'm sorry," Galing said. "I have another engagement. But if you would give her ladyship these —" He tried to push the packet of sketches into the servant's hands, but the man said, "If you please, sir. My lady said you were to follow me."

Galing followed, thinking furiously.

THERON STARED AT THE DOOR, THE SOLID WOOD bound with metal. It felt as dangerous to him as the forest at night once had. But now it was the barrier he must cross, the boundary between himself and the sacred grove where he would face his trial. He could hear, faintly, the cries of the hunt on the other side: people crying out, and laughing, making a music with their voices that rang with danger for him.

The door opened. Lord Nicholas Galing stood there, dressed in crimson. He was holding out a flat, brown package.

"Lord Theron," he said, "I give you these. I have no further use for them." He bowed. "Good night."

He was gone before Theron could move. The packet lay on the table. Slowly, Theron approached it, as if it were a beast that could spring and pounce. He sniffed at the ribbons before he untied them; they smelt faintly of mildew and sandalwood.

The sketches, though, smelled of Ysaud: her chalks, her pencils, her hands. Theron buried his face in the paper. He felt a chill along the vine etched into his flesh, a fierce pricking tingle like the ghost of the blade that had made it. He peeled off his jacket and his waistcoat, then his shirt, to expose it to the air. He turned the leaf of paper over and saw his own face, eyes closed in sleep. He was looking at a young man he did not really know, with a sweet mouth and winglike brows, captured in just a few lines; a face washed free of all sorrows by the aftermath of pleasure—drawn by the hand that had given him that pleasure.

"Ysaud," Theron whispered. He had loved the way she looked at him—as if everything in him delighted her and she could never have her fill. Basil looked at him that way, too. Theron's hand was nearly steady as he turned up another sketch. It was for one of Ysaud's paintings; he remembered the pose, the way his back had ached from leaning over the silver mirror she'd laid on the floor for him to peer into, half-kneeling, half-rising, his arms braced against the floor. She had tormented him with the placing of candles, moving them here and then there to get just the right reflection. The sketch, though, showed none of that—just his back, his haunches straining to flee and his body riveted by what the pool disclosed: the shadow of horns upon his brow.

Again, the door opened. Warm scented air rushed into the room, and the breeze from the open window rustled the sketches on the table.

"Ah," said Jessica, "good, you've got them. My guests are gone. Do you want to see the paintings?"

NAKED TO THE WAIST, THERON CAMPION STEPPED into the room that held the year of his life that he had given to Ysaud so he could love her and she could paint him in numinous, glowing scenes from their nation's golden history and its dark legend.

The canvases lined the walls of the octagonal salon. They were all light and shadow: acid yellow firelight hit the dull rose of illuminated flesh half-obscured by a green-black tree trunk or a star-dappled boulder. Blue stars danced in black water. Under a noonday sun, sharp green holly leaves pricked out the gently coruscated grays and umbers of an ancient oak. A still, silver pool was tarnished with the shadow of horns.

Theron paced to the center of the grove. Around him oak and holly rustled. He stood under sun and moon and stars. The water of the sacred pool glittered, half-blinding him. He bowed and, kneeling before it, looked into the water. His face was re-fleeted in the pool. He recognized the liquid eyes and soft muzzle of the stag. It was the hunted stag, the king stag, the deer that he must slay.

He was full of power, devoid of speech. And yet he knew himself. If he could speak, he would have spoken his own name.

Instead, he took the stone knife from his belt, the knife the wizard had given him, and raised it on high.

He smelled the man's approach, smelled his skin and his sweat and his fear. He saw the same fear in his own eyes, and the same pride. One of them must die. Kill the deer and rule as king; let the deer run free, and the man in him would soon be gone.

He thought then of the woods, of the sweetness of new grass and the wild joy of autumn rutting, the quick fighting and the slow dreaming without loss. And he thought of the stony labyrinth of city streets, of running wild in the smoky dark, the strain of sinew and the triumph of blood. He might now cast away the knife in that human hand, and run on four legs to where the hunt would never find him!

No one would ever find him. He would give up all the promises he had made, the duties his blood bound him to. He would be free of his past. Free of the burden of his speaking, and the burden of his dreams—and free of love and kindness, as well. Forget them all…

But he would not. Looking deep into his own eyes, he recognized that he had been born for this moment, trained to it all his life. In the last year, he had imbibed love and power and knowledge and magic. Remembering that, he could not cast away his name, his face, his humanity. He raised the knife. The stag opened his mouth and cried out for the loss of his sure hooves and branching horns, his leaping haunches and keenness of smell, and the green stirring of a spring morning as he felt the knife in his heart.

Then he lay still, a half-naked man on a marble floor, surrounded by art, with a painted ceiling above him depicting the constellations in their seasons.

Theron felt the world fall away from him. Then he was hearing a voice, someone's voice, saying, "Theron. Theron." There were hands on him, urging him to speak, and to look. Surely they must be Basil's, those kind and steady hands invading the darkness; Basil, come to the woods for him at last, to love him and reward him for having stood the trial, to bring him back to himself.

But when he opened his eyes, it was Jessica, his sister, gorgeously dressed and kneeling beside him, holding a cup of watered wine and saying, "Theron. Will you drink?"

He drank deep and came to himself enough to realize where he was—in Jessica's salon, surrounded by Ysaud's paintings. He started to shiver. She said, "For a moment, I thought you were dead. You were ungodly pale." She unhooked her overskirt and wrapped him in it. "You should go to bed," she said.

"No. Not now. This—" He gestured at the forest of canvas around him "—this is amazing. *You* are amazing—even more than I thought, I mean. Tell me all about it."

"At least get up off the floor."

That he could do, with her help. She settled him by the library fire, in a chair with blankets. Then she sent for wine and food for them both. Theron found that he wanted to eat everything on the tray, cheese and fruit and smoked goose and fish and meat. As he ate and drank, he seemed

to feel his whole self becoming more solid. His hands were his hands, not something in a painting, not something like a dream on a forest path. The meat smelled good to him. The blankets were comfortably scratchy and warm. He gnawed on a cold joint, and Jessica drank red wine and answered his questions.

"How on earth did you get the paintings?"

"Worship me," she commanded around a mouthful of bread and cheese. "God, I'm starving. I didn't dare eat until it was over. And I was stone cold sober the entire time. Drink some wine, it'll settle your nerves. If I'd known they would affect you that way, I'd have kept you away from those pictures."

"No," he said, "it's all right. Really, it is. I feel fine—better than I have in days."

"I was wondering if you'd even ever seen them before. If not, the shock could kill you. I should have thought of that. I mean—she did show you them, didn't she? That woman is capable of anything."

She sounded simultaneously smug and appalled. Theron looked closely at her, and decided not to ask. "What did your guests think of them?"

"They were impressed."

"By the sight of my naked ass?"

"Now, now." She wiggled a drumstick at him. "They don't *know* it's your naked ass."

"Don't be naïve, of course they know."

"Nah." She took a deep swig of wine. "They may *suppose* it is. They may even be right in that supposition. But the only way for them to *know*, is to get a look at the sketches—which we now possess. Gossip is like ginger nuts: delicious, ten to the copper, and worthless cold. As I am leaving in a week or so to sell these abroad, it will all be forgotten in a fortnight, and your—body remains your private property, to dispose of as you will."

Theron irritably shrugged off one of the blankets. "Unless Galing chooses to tell someone."

"But he will not. For the same reason you're not getting married."

"Which is what?"

"I am contesting your claim to Tremontaine."

He stood up. He was quite warm now. "Jess! Are you serious?"

"Only temporarily. My mother was an actress, remember? I've got about a week left to be very serious about it, then I can leave and you can forget

the whole thing."

He said, "My mother is a surgeon, but I'm not always trying to cut people open. How are you contesting my claim?"

"By pretending to be legitimate. I got one of my old friends to forge me some documents: it's not hard to do Alec's signature, and Rose could barely write."

He heard a brittle sorrow behind her words. "Jess," he said gently. "You know if you really wanted the duchy—"

It was her turn to jump up, waving her wine goblet like a banner: "No! I *don't* want the duchy! Even if I *were* legitimate. I've spent my whole life avoiding the duchy and what it means—can't you get that through your head? It's all a diversion—to convince the Randalls that you're a bad bargain after all."

"The Randalls! Were they here?"

"I'm not crude. They'll hear what they have to. But the paintings are not the point. If you think they didn't already know about you and Ysaud, you underestimate your soon-to-be-former future in-laws. What's a bit of talk about a man they already know can't keep his breeches closed, when the end of it is their daughter being installed as Duchess Tremontaine? No, my dear; what will scare off the Randalls is the notion that the girl might be stuck with you, without the title."

He said admiringly, "Katherine will never speak to you again."

"Yes, she will. I warned her, and I got her to finance my down-payment to Ysaud. Best investment she'll ever make. She'll thank me. They all will. No one liked this marriage but you, Theron. Katherine liked the idea of you being married, but the Randalls are no great catch. You can do better. As for Sophia, not to mention Marcus and Susan…I think they'll forgive my methods." There was a pause while she refilled her goblet. "By the way, you've missed something."

"What?" The wine and meat sat warm in his belly. He felt comfortable, unburdened, soft as warm wax.

"Galing! This also took care of Galing for you. He very nearly gave the sketches directly to me, since he thinks I'm trying to unseat you, something he's theoretically in favor of. But he's cautious, and he's a political creature. I could easily lose, and if I do, he doesn't want to risk being on Katherine's bad side. Never underestimate the advantage of powerful relatives."

"That's what Katherine's always telling me." Jessica grimaced at him. "I have just one last question," he said, rolling crumbs on the tabletop.

"Yes?"

"How did you know I didn't really want to get married?"

"Oh…lots of ways. You never talked about the girl, for one." She forbore to mention the fight near the Apricot. "When Galing threatened you with the sketches, you didn't even worry about how your betrothed would feel. That was pretty telling. But most of all…Most of all—you said Katherine talked you into it. I knew that was a bad idea."

Theron grinned at his half-sister. "How well you know us all." He leaned back in his chair. "You know, it's not that they're not both splendid people, Katherine and Marcus. But don't you find that their vision is a little narrow?"

Jessica idly sliced a grape into tiny pieces with her knife. "Council and taxes, you mean?"

"Taxes and Tremontaine. Tremontaine and the City. They don't really have a feel for the Land," he said with newfound certainty. "The whole land, I mean. It's all there, if you are looking for it. Metaphorically, of course: nobody can see it all with their eyes open. But if you close them, thus…I can see corn growing in Morpeth, and the worm gnawing at the root. The fish in the river—salmon racing past Buckhaven, and the way the rain falls to make the waters rise."

"What's Tremontaine to all that?" Theron asked.

Dear Sophia,

Theron and I are having such a good time catching up with one another that I've asked him to stay here with me for a few more days. You and Katherine will be hearing shortly from the Randalls, I make no doubt, and a few other people as well. Pretend to be annoyed with me, and if anyone asks, please tell them Theron is shut up with you there in the Riverside House, sulking and plotting revenge. He sends his love, as do I

—

Jessica

chapter VI

Lord Nicholas Galing had played his highest cards and the pirate queen had trumped them all. He found he could not take his loss philosophically. His conviction that Campion was a threat to the city's peace was not yet dead, though his reason insisted that Lady Jessica's action had neatly gutted it. What could the boy do, exposed before all his peers as an artist's model and plaything? No one would remember how beautiful the pictures were, how fine the compositions, how vivid and living the tints. All the nobles would remember was Campion's shame. Were he proclaimed king twenty times over, all they'd do was laugh.

Immediately upon returning the sketches to Campion, Nicholas had left Lady Caroline's Folly and strode off into the night, ignoring the chair-men and linkboys clamoring for his custom. By the time he had turned into his own street, his feet were sore from walking so far and so briskly in thin slippers, and his heart was sore with his failure to bring Campion to heel. It was all very well for the city to be saved, but Galing was too honest, at least with himself, not to acknowledge that he wanted to be the one who'd saved it—not some showy bastard with dyed hair and gaudy, foreign clothes. Waiting for his manservant to let him in, he decided to burn all the paper cluttering his study: Edward's notes, Arlen's ambiguous messages, the transcripts of the examinations of Finn and Lindley at MidWinter. All Henry Fremont's letters. Then he'd drink a glass or two of brandy, go to

bed, and put the whole disaster out of his mind. It was what Arlen had told him to do, after all.

But when Nicholas took off his velvet coat and picked up a handful of paper with the intention of casting it into the flames of his study fire, his eye fell on the words written at the top: "From the first days of the Union, the nobles hated the wizards, and plotted to weaken them."

Basil St Cloud's words, transcribed by Henry Fremont just as he'd spoken them. They were incautious words by any measure. Seditious words, if heard and taken to heart by men who hated the nobles. Dangerous words, if uttered by a man who believed that magic was real. And hadn't the magister offered to defend that very proposition before the whole University this spring?

Did Basil St Cloud honestly believe in magic? How could he, when the wizards had been debunked by every major historian of the past two hundred years, beginning with Vespas in *The Book of Kings*, and proceeding through Fleming and Trevor and White to old Doctor Tortua in *Hubris and the Fall of the Kings*? Why, the man's lectures were peppered with quotes from them all; how could he be planning to debunk the debunkers? Nicholas ground his teeth. Maybe there was something in Henry's lecture notes he'd overlooked.

Impatiently, Nicholas began to rummage through the mess of papers. His manservant came in with the brandy and a face like a priest at MidWinter, asking if he'd like something to eat. Nicholas rejected the brandy with loathing. If he was going to make sense of all this and prove that Arlen was wrong, for once, he was going to have to work all night. And if he was going to work all night, he needed chocolate, not brandy.

He ordered the chocolate and returned to the papers. He'd allowed them to get out of order, piling this on that without regard to chronology or subject. Well, he'd just have to arrange them and see what turned up.

It was a tedious process. He needed to read at least a little of each paper before assigning it a pile, and many of Fremont's reports touched on several subjects at once: the Northerners, the enmity between St Cloud and Doctor Roger Crabbe, St Cloud's lectures on ancient history. He kept at it doggedly.

Chocolate appeared. He drank it, and ate the cold meat that appeared with it. Afterward, his head was clearer, and the work went faster. Midnight

came and went, and still Lord Nicholas read and sorted with increasing excitement. The pattern he had outlined to Arlen was clearer than ever, but now he saw that the figure standing in the center, the figure to whom all paths led, was not Theron Campion, but Campion's lover, Basil St Cloud. Basil St Cloud, who believed the wizards' power to be not only true magic but a benevolent gift to the land and its people.

There it was, in plain view, for anyone who bothered to look for it, transcribed from St Cloud's lectures: "*The ancient wizards were first, servants of the Land, and second, servants of the Truth. When they came South with King Alcuin the Diplomat, they learned to serve political expedience as well. It weakened their magic and weakened their minds.*" And there: "*The nobles mistrusted the wizards from the beginning and passed law after law limiting their influence and the practice of magic.*"

Basil St Cloud was a careful man, meticulous and scholarly. Surely he would never have posed the challenge if he wasn't very sure he had the proof to win it.

It was the only thing that made sense of it all. Galing could not imagine what St Cloud had found, but it would have to be something spectacular, something incontestable. It would, he realized reluctantly, have to be something that genuinely demonstrated magic's potency. Not a letter, not a document. The real thing: a talisman, perhaps, or a wizard's manual. Whatever it was, he'd use it to win the debate on the Great Hall steps. And then what? Take up the Horn Chair and go tamely back to lecturing and writing? Nicholas laughed at the thought. No. The Horn Chair couldn't possibly be the point of this ridiculous challenge. If Basil St Cloud had found something to waken a sleeping magic from the past, waken it to life and to his service, what would he—what would any man—do with it but use it to take everything? Say St Cloud had found the means to transform himself into a latter-day wizard. Surely his ambition was to rule the land as the wizards had ruled it in ancient times.

Galing had read Henry's lecture notes. By St Cloud's own evidence, a wizard needed a king to help him realize his full power, a king who was his lover. How fortunate for the good doctor that he had just such a lover ready to hand!

Nicholas turned over a page headed "*Notes on the Spring Festival,*" and read, "*Northern Icings were consecrated to the Land every year at the Festival of*

Sowing. For a new king, the consecration served as his formal induction as Servant of the Land—his coronation, as it were; although the Northern kings wore no crowns."

As far as Nicholas could tell, Theron Campion was likely to be made king at the debate whether he'd plotted for it or not.

Having reached this point in his cogitations, Nicholas rang for his manservant. He had to ring three times, and when the man turned up at last, his nightshirt showed under his unbuttoned livery.

"What time is it?" Galing demanded.

"Five, sir, or thereabouts. Not quite dawn."

"Damn." Galing rubbed his eyes. "Go get me something to eat, will you? I'm ravenous."

When the manservant returned with toast and jam, his master had fallen asleep in his chair, his curly head cocked back at an uncomfortable angle and his legs stretched out before him. The manservant contemplated his sleeping master for a moment, then spread a rug over him, laid another log on the fire, extinguished the lamp, and left him to it.

THE DISSOLUTION OF THE BETROTHAL CONTRACT between Alexander Theron Campion of Tremontaine and Genevieve Beatrice Halliday Randall was quickly and easily achieved. The young lady, her mother said, had given certain indications that she was not yet ready for the solemn duties of marriage. Since it would be rude for Theron's family to seem not to mind, Tremontaine's lawyers put up a token fuss, which allowed the Randall lawyers to point out an irregularity in the contract's provision for the return of dowry in case of death without issue, which they had somehow previously overlooked. This, the Tremontaine side said, was unfortunately a point not open to discussion. And so, to the satisfaction of all parties, the contract was declared null and void. Corollary papers were signed, including the old-fashioned statutory agreement that all had been settled with honor, and thus no swordsmen were to be employed. Theron's necklace, however, was not returned; clearly the Randalls considered it just recompense for all the trouble and embarrassment he had subjected them to.

His family considered the necklace a small price to pay. Sophia in particular was nothing if not relieved. And it freed the Duchess Katherine to turn her attention to the fuss everyone was now making about Jessica's announcement. The duchess had written to Sophia:

> *In typical fashion, Jessica has managed to turn this whole affair into a masquerade ball. As people are watching all of us to see which way the wind blows, it follows that you must be seen visiting me at Tremontaine House, to show that I continue to support Theron's claim to Tremontaine. I shall not, however, be allowed to go and see what J. has made of Lady Caroline's Folly—although the friends of mine who were there tell me it is quite something. And, of course,* Jessica *cannot be seen to be speaking to either of us; which means, in this case, that she will visit me in disguise, probably this afternoon.*
>
> *Theron is in hiding at the Folly (how appropriate!); probably the best place for him. I hope you will not mind too much, but there with his sister is the last place anyone will look for him. Of course I think it would be best for him to go to the country until it has all blown over, but in view of his recent illness, Jessica says we should wait before he makes the journey. I do think it advisable, however, that he go soon. People will be talking for a while, and you know how he suffered over the Ysaud gossip the first time around. This will be much worse. It will die down when J. leaves and the Randall girl finds another fiancé. But we have all been worried about his health. The summer heat is bound to be bad. Will you go with him? I thought to Highcombe, which did him so much good when he was a child. And everyone there loves him. Perhaps you can leave soon after this absurd debate, which both Arlen and the University Governors assure me I must attend. I suppose you will be there, too, looking official in your robes.*

Sophia was used to allowing Katherine to judge what was best for public displays of Tremontaine policy. But the physician could wish that she had gotten a letter from her son herself.

Theron had in fact written to Sophia, but his sister had not sent the letter. She did not think it would reassure his mother to be invited to

witness the ceremony of his union with his wizard and lover, on the steps of the Great Hall, at the Festival of the Spring Sowing.

HAVING DECIDED THAT HE MUST, AT ALL COSTS, prevent Theron Campion and Basil St Cloud from coming together on the steps of the Great Hall, Nicholas Galing was not as pleased as he might be to hear that Theron had been bundled off to the country by his cousin. Perhaps it was because the rumor was only one of the half-dozen or so speculations concerning the Tremontaine scandal making the rounds of Hill gatherings.

"Wasn't it delicious, my dear?" inquired Lord Condell, resplendent in rose brocade and opals at Lady Horn's musical evening. "One suspected that she was painting him all that time, but one didn't actually know. And the poses! I hardly knew where to look." His fan, his wickedly sparkling eyes, said he'd known very well where to look, and how much he'd enjoyed the view. "I've been at the point of challenge with Tyrone, whether those leaves were actually painted on young Campion's body or a charming invention of the artist's imagination. What do you think, my dear?"

"That I prefer leaves on trees, Condell, and a human head on my lover's shoulders. It's no wonder he's slunk off to the country."

"Oh, no, my dear," Condell said. "He's not in the country at all. I'm sure of it. The redoubtable dowager would certainly have accompanied him to the country, and she's very much in evidence, I hear, doing good as usual. No, they've got him locked up somewhere he won't do any harm."

The Duke of Karleigh wandered up, wanting to know if anyone could find something else to talk about other than the Tremontaine affair.

"What else is there to talk about?" Lord Condell asked rhetorically. "The Great Wizard Debate at the University?"

"I don't know what the world is coming to," said Karleigh. "Not that the Tremontaines ever were any good. Bad blood, is what I think. And bringing a foreigner into it didn't help. Perhaps we're better off with the bastard chit after all—at least she's pure native blood on both sides."

"Pure?" Lord Condell was amused. "The Black Rose was an actress, Karleigh."

"From Riverside. Not from some island no one's ever heard of. No reason the bastard chit shouldn't inherit, if she's legitimate after all."

"Now, Karleigh, you don't believe in those marriage lines, do you?" asked Condell, "You couldn't. She was amusing herself at our expense, the minx. Just look at what she was wearing!"

That conversation, or the gist of it, echoed through the salons and dinners and card parties. Theron Campion was ill; he was mad. He was in the country; he was locked up in Riverside; he was confined to Tremontaine House for trying to murder Ysaud. Jessica Campion was a legitimate contender for heir of Tremontaine; she was an upstart, or even a foreigner who had killed the real Jessica on board her ship and was trying to claim her inheritance. The Duchess Katherine would recognize her claim and step down; she would call blood challenge on her and fight the challenge herself. Unless Lord Theron did so. He was, after all, known to have run as a boy with killers in Riverside, in one of those gangs that required three dead bodies as an entrance fee. Also, it was entirely possible that Jessica was the legitimate heir in more ways than one; there had been talk of the young Katherine Talbert being with child when she first came into the duchy, either by a family servant or by her uncle himself. Why else would the old duke have left everything to an underage girl, unless it was to make it up to her? Stories of the Mad Duke's habits and proclivities were brought out of storage and aired anew.

Nicholas Galing listened to it all, exclaiming, wondering, doubting volubly that there was anything in it, whatever it was. He'd have given his sapphire neck-pin for hard information on Theron's whereabouts and state of mind, but the troublesome young noble seemed to have stepped from his half-sister's house into oblivion. There was nothing for it, Galing decided, but to turn up at the debate and see what came up. If nothing else, he told himself, he'd be able to follow the arguments.

JESSICA APPEARED IN KATHERINE'S STUDY DISGUISED AS a gardener, her straw hat pulled low over her face. When her cousin greeted her she took off the hat and shook out her hair and gratefully accepted a drink. Handing her a

glass of wine, the duchess said, "Aren't you going to check to see if it's poisoned?"

"Alas," said Jessica, "I left my Authentic Guaranteed Unicorn's Horn back on the ship. Along with my fortified Blood Stone. I'll just have to trust you."

"It's mutual," said the duchess. "For, God help me, Jessica, if you are using my money and family to pull off the greatest scam of your career, you'd better hope that horn is authentic."

Jessica flicked an imaginary bug from the rim of her glass. "Don't be melodramatic. Haven't I worked miracles in barely a week for Theron and Sophia?"

"Sophia!" Katherine exclaimed. "Sophia hasn't heard what they're saying out there. I have. It's every piece of scandal we've worked to bury for the past twenty years, trotted out for an airing. It's her worst nightmare. All she cares about is Theron—"

"And sick people. And poor people."

Katherine looked impatient. "Yes, I know, but she'd do all that anyway."

"Because she cares about people," Jessica said doggedly. "Admit it, Katherine—just because your whole life is Tremontaine doesn't mean that hers is."

Katherine breathed deeply through her narrowed nostrils. She hated the way Jessica could make her lose her temper. She was not going to do it this time. She said evenly, "Sophia gave up a lot to come here."

"That is the myth, isn't it?" Jess said coolly. "But you know what? I've been to Kyros. It's nothing, Katherine. It's an island with some goats and some rocks and some honey bees. Sophia was a village healer, a midwife. Here she's a duchess, a trained surgeon. Just what is it she's supposed to have given up?"

Katherine looked steadily at her flamboyant kinswoman. "You don't care even about Sophia? I thought she was the one of us you loved."

It was Jessica's turn to look impatient. "Stop trying to get at my feelings, Duchess. That's not how I do business. You want to pull on levers labeled *Love* and *Loyalty* and get me to do what you want—but I'm not fitted with them. All I want to do is tell you the truth, but you'd rather not hear it. Well, now I'm going to tell you an important truth, and you'd better listen." She leaned across Katherine's desk, her scarred hands spread on the bright

wood. “You’re going to have to start looking for another heir. Because Theron is mad.”

Katherine’s voice shook with fury. “What have you done?”

“What have I done?” Jessica threw back her head and laughed. “That’s rich! I’m the only one who *hasn’t* done! He’s been stark staring bonkers since I got here, and probably before, and not a single blessed one of you has noticed a thing. Not you, not Marcus, not even Sophia. He’s been fighting knife duels down by the docks. He’s been having visions. He doesn’t know where he is half the time. And now he thinks his University lover is going to make him king.”

“*What?*” Appalled, Katherine remembered Arlen’s visits. “That’s not madness, that’s treason.”

“Now I have your attention. Treason touches Tremontaine.”

“*Stop it!*” Katharine shouted, temper irrevocably lost. “You want me to leave your heart out of it? Then you leave mine, Jessica, and stop goading me. You have your ship, your people—I assume you care well for them, or you wouldn’t have them still. I have the duchy. If you’re not going to help me care for it, then get out of my house.”

“I’ve got Theron,” Jessica said softly.

“So you have,” Katherine snapped. “But if he’s mad, I don’t want him.”

Jessica watched her for a long minute. “You’re bluffing.”

Katherine nodded slowly. “I am. How perceptive of you. I do want him. Now: are you bargaining or threatening?”

Jessica Campion removed her hands from the desk and went to the window. “Neither.” She spoke to the view outside, the long green lawns of her childhood. “I’m telling you he’s safe with me at the Folly. He’s locked up, and he’s angry, but he’s not going anywhere. If I can keep him from the debate this week, he might calm down. If he does, then maybe he can go home. If he doesn’t, he’s all yours.” Her back still to her cousin, she asked. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so,” said the duchess. There was a long and uncomfortable pause. “Will you let me send a physician?”

Jessica turned from the window, all business. “Only if there is someone you trust not to tell the city and not to tell Sophia.”

“Marcus, then?”

"I'd rather not. It's hard to know how Theron will react to things. How's this: I'll ask Theron to write you a letter, and let you judge for yourself. If you genuinely think he's better off locked up in the attic of Tremontaine House, like his great-grandfather, Marcus can come get him, and I wash my hands of the lot of you."

Katherine regarded her problematic relative thoughtfully. "Very well," she said at last. "I believe you're trying to help. But I'll want to see that letter. There's a lot at stake here you don't entirely understand."

Jessica picked up the disreputable hat and bundled her hair into it. "I won't argue with that," she said agreeably, and left the duchess to her thoughts.

THE COMPANIONS OF THE KING MET IN A BACK ROOM of the Green Man over cider and venison stew. There were six men in the little room, all sporting braids and carved wooden oak leaves: the First Five of the King's Companions, plus another, more junior one. They were all tall men save for the youngest of them, a small, bird-boned youth with bright copper-colored hair. They were silent, just now, with that gravid silence that falls over a group of men who have temporarily argued themselves to a standstill.

"Look," said Lindley. "We don't have to understand all the details. It's a mystery. We just have to have faith and be ready for whatever happens."

The tallest and grimmest of the Northerners held Lindley's gaze for a long moment. His name was Robert Coppice, and before the arrest of Greenleaf and Smith, he'd been Third Companion. Now he was First Companion, Master of the Hunt and Keeper of the Mysteries, and he felt his responsibilities weigh heavy on his shoulders. After the MidWinter Hunt, Greenleaf and Smith had spoken of a new king who would appear to lead them. The Companions were to hold themselves in readiness for his advent, after which everything would become clear.

These prophecies troubled Coppice. In the manner of all prophecies, they raised more questions than they answered. And Greenleaf, who kept the Mysteries very close, had taken them with him to the Chop, putting Coppice in the awkward and irritating position of being dependent on the

Southron scholar Lindley for some of his knowledge of the lore and rituals of the ancient North.

The arrest of Greenleaf and Smith was a thorn under Coppice's nail for many reasons, not the least of which was his fear that they had revealed everything they knew to the Serpent Chancellor's torturers. Even after all these weeks, Coppice walked abroad with his shoulders itching, waiting for a Guard's heavy hand to grab him and a Guard's Southern voice to announce that he was under arrest for treason. There was something to be said for the fact that he and his Companions were still walking free.

"It is a mystery," he said heavily. "We are agreed on that, at any rate."

The Third Companion Farwell laid a comforting hand on his friend's arm. "We're agreed on more than that."

"We are?" said Coppice wearily. "All Greenleaf told us was that the new king is to be consecrated in the spring, and that we must be witnesses. We still don't know exactly where or when the consecration is to take place, nor who is to perform it."

"A wizard," said Farwell, in the tone of one stating the obvious.

The strong-necked natural scientist Hob sneered. "All the wizards are dead, Farwell, unless you happen to be hiding one under your bed."

"Guidry," said Lindley patiently. "I keep telling you. Guidry will come again and bind the new king to the Land. It says so in Martindale." He closed his eyes and recited: "*So Guidry retired to the Grove Within to rest him there and tarry in a place beyond the ken of man until that time when the Land's great need should call him forth to bind and dedicate a new king to its service.*"

"And what in the Seven Hells is that supposed to mean?" Hob burst out. "It didn't make sense to me the first twelve times you recited it, and it doesn't make sense now. How are we supposed to know that this debate is the right time?"

Coppice's long hands bunched themselves into fists. "Greenleaf said it was, remember? And there are the other signs."

Lindley obligingly quoted them. "*A trembling in the earth; a star that trails bright hair across the heavens; a famine.*"

Hob shook his head. "Foolishness. The earth trembles often in the North, and famine is a more or less constant fact these days. These things are natural science, not a message from the Living Land."

This opinion inspired Farwell, as it always did, to demand whether Hob even believed in the Living Land, and if he didn't, why he was a King's Companion. And that inspired Hob, as it always did, to declare that he believed in the North and the power of the North, and that was what he'd always thought being a King's Companion was about. The debate went on, treading ground already trodden to bare rock. Lindley quoted extensively from Martindale, his lecture notes, and heroic poetry; points were brought up and argued. Obscure ritual phrases were parsed and analyzed.

"*From the seed of kings comes the fall of kings and their rising again,*" Lindley repeated. "It's Campion. Who else could it be?"

"Any noble at all," said Hob truculently. "They all have royal blood, if you go back far enough. For that matter, so do we. And why now?"

"The star trailing bright hair," Lindley said patiently.

"It was up there, right at the start of Harvest term," Coppice reminded them.

"And we know that Greenleaf saw the horns on Campion at Last Night and drank magic from his lips," said Farwell. "I saw them too. He's the king, Hob, Southron or not. The Land has chosen, and it is not our place to question its choice."

There was a rather depressed silence, and then Burl, the Second Companion, asked, "What about the wizard? It's all very well to say that Guidry will come again, but where, and how? Did Greenleaf know?"

Coppice shrugged. "If he did, he didn't tell me. Lindley's got an idea that his magister, Doctor St Cloud, will summon him out of wherever he is—"

"The Grove Within, beyond the ken of man," Lindley interrupted eagerly.

"—the Grove Within, at some point during the debate he's challenged Crabbe to. No, Hob, before you ask, we don't know how he'll do it. This is magic, man, not a chemical demonstration."

"Well," said Hob with some satisfaction, "your precious magister is going to have to conjure up a king as well as a wizard. No one has seen hide nor hair of Campion for days. There's some scandal with those nobles—rumor has it he's been bundled off to the country and locked up until it all blows over."

Lindley smiled a fox's smile at him. "If you hate it all so much, Hob—me, Campion, magic, Guidry—then don't come to the debate. Stay home and

study whatever it is natural scientists study, and leave your fellows to support their king in the first moments of his triumph. You'll miss it all, of course, but you won't mind that."

Hob stood up, knocking over his stool with a clatter. "You're right there, city boy. I won't mind never seeing your carrot top again, or hearing your damned Southron voice braying about magic and wizards. The mysteries of the wood are one thing," he said, appealing to Coppice. "They are the strength of the North and the bond of our brotherhood. But I'll be damned if I'm going to wait for a wizard out of the mists of time to appear on the steps of the Great Hall on the word of a Southern boy who has never run the Northern Hills or drunk deer's blood in the winter twilight."

When he was gone, Coppice took a deep breath and said, "Right. Does anyone else feel as Hob does?"

"We all do," said Burl forthrightly. "But we're mindful of our oaths. And some of us have known things in the mountains and in the rites that make us less sure than Hob is that magic has fled the Land."

"You'll go to the debate, then?" asked Lindley.

"We'll go," said Burl. "And we'll entreat the other Companions to come with us. But if it so falls out that this debate comes and goes and nothing comes of it but one Southron Doctor of History being preferred over another, you'll have us to answer to, Lindley, and you, too, Coppice."

Coppice glanced anxiously at Lindley, looking for some sign of reassurance. But the young redhead's eyes were on the candle flame and his hand was on the oak leaf around his neck, and the expression on his face was that of a man who has heard all he needs to hear.

chapter VII

AFTER A WEEK OF UNSETTLED RAIN AND WIND, THE first day of Spring Festival dawned warm and clear. The breeze could not have breathed more sweetly, the sky shone more blue, the sun smiled more benignly upon the warming earth. It was a day for dancing on the grass and lying with your lover on soft moss—or at the very least, walking out by the river beyond the city walls.

Officially, it was a day for attending services in honor of the Green God of growth and plenty. In these secular days, the only celebrants in the Cathedral were gentleman farmers hedging their bets, the Crescent Chancellor and his staff, and a few old men and women raised to honor the gods. Those who ignored the Cathedral bells pursued other traditional activities: settling bets, announcing betrothals, digging gardens, fighting challenges.

As the University bell tolled six, Master Leonard Rugg stood in Minchin Street, beating a brisk tattoo on the door to Basil's lodgings. He was attended by Benedict Vandeleur, Peter Godwin, and Henry Fremont, all of them clean as soap and water could make them, and dressed in their festive best. Of St Cloud's inner circle of followers, two were absent: Anthony Lindley, off with his Northern friends, and Justis Blake, presumably lost in love.

The scruffy boy let them in with a yawn and the news that he hadn't seen hide nor hair of Doctor St Cloud in days. Vandeleur and Godwin exchanged worried glances; Fremont felt his heart sink to the patched soles of his scarlet boots.

"Don't worry," Rugg told them. "He was well enough two days ago to tell me to go soak my head and leave him alone. He wouldn't even let me in, but I heard him just fine through the door."

They mounted the stairs. Remembering his visit to St Cloud with Justis Blake, how strange the magister had been, how gaunt and haunted, Henry wondered what they'd find waiting for them.

"St Cloud?" Rugg banged on the door. "It's Rugg and your students. Let us in. We've come to take you Crabbe-hunting."

A perfectly sane voice bade them enter. Maybe it was going to be all right after all. And, at first, it looked as if it might be. The curtains were pulled back to let in the sun; the casement was open to let in the air. The room smelled of candle wax and ink. The man by the mantelpiece was dressed respectably in brown, with white linen showing at the wrists and neck. It took Henry a moment to realize that St Cloud's stubble had been allowed to grow into a full beard. And he'd hacked his hair short to his ears, where it curled vigorously.

"My god, Basil, you look like a carter!" Rugg sounded more angry than distressed. "They'll laugh you out of the University before you even open your mouth. Are you mad?"

It was a real question, delivered with some force. Doctor St Cloud gave it a moment's consideration before smiling and saying, "No, Leonard. Only preoccupied. It's been so long since I shaved, I simply forgot." He ran a hand over his beard, thick and glossy as an animal's pelt. "I've gotten used to it."

"Well, you can just get unused to it again," Doctor Rugg snapped. "What's your excuse for your hair?"

St Cloud shrugged. "It kept getting in the way, and one night I couldn't find so much as a piece of string to tie it with. So I cut it off." He smiled ruefully into Rugg's worried eyes. "It was a daft thing to do, Leonard, and I regretted it at once. But I'm not the only magister in the University to decide that long hair is an affectation he can just as well do without."

"Quite. The hair's a minor point," said Rugg, "but the beard has to go. I was going to treat you to breakfast at Bet's, but we'll go to the baths instead, get you decently barbered. Got everything? Where's your gown?"

St Cloud collected his black gown from the back of a chair and put it on. The long, green sleeves swung heavily, weighted with his purse, perhaps, or books. He noticed his students, standing in an uncomfortable knot by the door. "Vandeleur, Fremont, Godwin, I thank you for coming. You have all paid dearly for my pride, and I am grateful for your patience

and loyalty. When this is over, I'll repay you with all the attention and knowledge at my disposal."

It was the old St Cloud who spoke, charming and self-assured and reasonable. But Henry could not help whispering to Vandeleur, as they followed their magister out into Minchin Street, "What does he remind you of?"

"A man who's worked himself into a state of exhaustion," snapped Vandeleur. "What should he remind me of?"

"The window in the Great Hall," said Henry. "The bearded man. The wizard."

Peter Godwin, overhearing this last, stopped dead on the landing and stared up at Fremont. "So he does!" he exclaimed. "I'll be hanged. I wonder if he realizes?"

"So do I," said Henry grimly. "And that's not the only thing I wonder."

"Debate's today," Rugg announced from below. "Not next week."

"Coming!" Vandeleur shouted, and grabbed Henry's arm. "I swear, Fremont, if I hear another word out of you about wizards, it's the last word you'll utter in this life. Am I clear?"

NICHOLAS GALING DRESSED FOR THE HISTORIANS' debate with all of his usual care. He wore green, for spring, with a waistcoat embroidered with jonquils. In deference to the gravity of the occasion, the green was dark, and he wore no lace. He put on the jet signet his father had given him when he came of age and a jet pin in his neckcloth, then picked up, after some hesitation, the dagger he carried when he made his occasional excursions to the docks.

He stopped at the Gilded Cockatrice and downed a meat roll and a tankard of ale by way of fortification for the trials of the day, then set off for the Great Court. The narrow streets were crowded with Scholars, Fellows, and Doctors, chattering excitedly, hailing their friends, chewing a last mouthful of breakfast, buying steamed buns and slices of tomato pie from stalls the provident hosts had set up in the windows of their taverns.

As Nicholas got closer to the Great Court, the press grew until he could hardly push his way along. Long experience in negotiating crowded Hill

parties came to his aid; he slid and darted among the shifting clumps, and finally found a side street that let him out at the corner of the Great Court, right at the foot of the Hall steps.

The steps ran the full length of the building, and were wide and shallow in proportion, creating a kind of natural stage above the Court. Just now, they were packed with Doctors and Governors and minor officials of the University, their bright sleeves waving like flags as they jostled for places.

"You here, Galing?" It was Lord Halliday, who made a hobby of philosophy, and never missed a public lecture on an interesting subject. He was standing on the bottom step as if he'd taken root there, arm in arm with Lord Edmond Godwin. "Some fellow in a red dressing-gown told us to stand here, and we're holding our position against all comers. Care to join us?"

Nicholas did, and made himself absentmindedly charming while the mess around them settled slowly into an orderly pattern. He studied it and positioned himself carefully, one step below the bottom-most row of Governors, at the inner edge of the little cluster of nobles. Besides Lord Halliday, there were few interested enough in University matters to abandon their holiday amusements to listen to a historical debate. Lord Edmond Godwin was there because he was concerned about his youngest son, Peter. Others were present in their capacity as University Governors—the Duchess Tremontaine, for example.

Galing stole a glance at the duchess, who stood two steps above him, talking to her neighbor. She was small, round-faced, all but overwhelmed by the scarlet glory of her Governor's robe. He thought she looked strained. She caught him watching her and stared forthrightly back, clearly wondering whether she knew him. Boldly, Nicholas Galing gave her a smile and a bow. Still puzzled, she nodded back.

He turned to look out over the Great Court, which was stuffed as full of bodies as it could hold—a sea of black academic robes, broken here and there by small, bright shoals of civilians. Galing's eye fell on a familiar face not far from the steps: Henry Fremont, looking sullen as a donkey. And those men around him must be St Cloud's students.

Edmond Godwin said, "Oh, there's my boy! There's Peter!" and waved. The young boy beside Fremont cracked an embarrassed smile and waved back. Galing saw Fremont glance toward him, start, and blanch. Galing

nodded to his erstwhile spy in a friendly manner, then watched him flush and shrug as the stalwart lad behind him questioned him.

Whatever else happened, this was going to be fun.

In the years before David, Duke Tremontaine, killed Gerard the Last King, the Spring Festival had been the gaudiest and most licentious of the four seasonal celebrations. A great stag woven of rushes and fluttering with green ribbons was borne through the streets to the music of pipe and tabor. Crowds of women surrounded it, leaping and grabbing at the ribbons. She who succeeded in detaching one and holding on to it was assured of a man or a child—whichever she lacked—by year's end. Young girls tied their ribbons around their necks, or laced their dresses with them as a signal to the young men. Young wives tied theirs in a more private place, to show their husbands where their duty lay. Long ago, the court had camped in the fields beyond the city walls, and the king and his companions lay with every woman who pleased them, naked on the new-ploughed earth like foxes.

Over the course of the generations, the Great Stag had shattered into a dozen lesser deer—horned heads on poles, antlered dancers, a comic hobby-deer with a huge, stuffed pizzle under its scut—and the green ribbons were tossed to the crowd or given, with a kiss, to the girls who ducked, squealing, under the hobby's wide skirt. Anyone wore a ribbon who could come by one—granddams, schoolboys, toothless, grinning infants. Justis Blake wore one around his tail of sandy hair, tied in a jaunty bow. So did the fair Marianne, who'd insisted on seeing the debate that had put her Justy in such a swivet.

There weren't many green ribbons to be seen in the Great Court; hobbies and horned men didn't come into the University. There was plenty of greenery, though. The two statues of Reason and Imagination flanking the steps were rakishly garlanded with ivy. A clump of men gathered on and below Imagination's pedestal carried new-budded branches. Justis automatically registered the branches as oak, since oak leafs out later than most other trees, and then noticed that the men were Northerners, braided, gowned, and grim as death. The crowd shifted, and Justis caught sight of Lindley's hair flaming out among them, then disappearing again.

So he wasn't the only one to have deserted St Cloud's flock. It wasn't a real desertion, he reminded himself: he still agreed in principle with his magister's philosophy and scholarly method. It was just that St Cloud's irresponsible attitude had distressed him, and Marianne needed him, and it was nice to be making a little money and not always having to defend every word he said with examples and quotations. Still, he should have gone with the others this morning to lend a hand getting St Cloud to the Master Governor's house on time.

Marianne squeezed his hand. "Why so down-in-the mouth, love?"

"This is a serious moment. You won't see many smiles until this is all over." Justis looked down at her pretty, soft face. "I shouldn't have brought you. It'll take hours. You'll be bored silly."

"I'll be with you," Marianne said. "You'll tell me what's happening, and I won't be bored a bit. Oh, look there, on the steps! That's never a woman!"

Justis squinted. The sides of the steps were packed with dignitaries, a divided sea of scarlet and black. On the deep top step he saw that wooden seats had been set out for the older or more important officials. The outgoing Horn chair, old Tortua, was tottering toward one of them, supported by a tall, graceful figure crowned with a coronet of dark hair.

"That's Lady Sophia Campion," Justis said. "She holds a Chair of Surgery. I've seen her once before. She's a fair piece of work, as my mother would say."

"She'd have to be, to get around all those old men. Handsome, too, considering she'll not see forty again. When's the party start, then?"

Over the ocean-swell noise of the crowd, Justis heard a faint, melodic blaring and the measured pulse of a drum. "Soon," he said. "Listen. That's them now."

"Where?" asked Marianne, tiptoeing vainly. "I can't see a thing."

AMONG ALL THOSE PRESENT FOR THE DEBATE, JESSICA Campion had arguably the best view of the proceedings. She stood all alone at an excellent vantage point on the carved stone gallery that ran along the exterior of the Great Hall above the frieze of the kings, right below the glass window of the wizard and the deer. She wasn't afraid of heights and

she disliked being jostled. It had been surprisingly easy to slip into the hall and up the winding steps to the gallery. Now she leaned in the shadow of an arch with her elbows on the balustrade and watched the crowd below shift and settle like a kaleidoscope.

Jessica enjoyed ceremonial display, and the procession currently winding its slow way through the Great Court was as fine of its kind as one of the Prince of Cham's Public Breakfasts. The University may not have had much recent experience with academic challenges, but it was at great pains to let everyone know that this was a solemn and important occasion.

First into the square marched two trumpeters and a drummer, their long hair clubbed, their black sleeves edged in the green denoting Fellows of the Humane Sciences. Four flags followed—one for each of the four colleges of the University: Humane Sciences, Natural Sciences, Law, and Physic—borne by the College Bursars, robed each in the appropriate color. Behind them came the two disputing Historians, accompanied by their seconds, carrying staves decorated with flowers and ribbons. Even at University, it was Spring Festival.

Jessica enjoyed the show. Theron had been telling her quite a lot about the University and its denizens over the past week; she couldn't wait to get a look at the famous Basil St Cloud. It was a pity Theron wasn't there to see it, but there was no question of letting him out before the debate. After it was over, Jessica expected he would either be cured of his delusions or turned over to Sophia for good. He had been making Jessica some very interesting promises, to be sure, but she doubted he could deliver.

THE SPRING FESTIVAL WAS A GOOD TIME FOR EVEN the most carefully brought up young people to slip loose from the constraints of everyday life. Tutors and governesses were given a holiday, and parents went off to enjoy themselves. Thus it was that, on the Hill, two young girls were lurking on a street they had no business being on, in the shadow of a house they were not supposed to know about.

"Frannie! Come on!"

Looking up at the crumbling wall surrounding Lady Caroline's Folly, Lady Francesca knew a moment of panic. She wondered if it was too late to

go home and slip back into the drawing room where she and Lady Agatha Perry were supposed to be weaving ribbons into festival crowns. But, she reminded herself sternly, people in books are never frightened by adventure; it is only afterward, when they discover the blood running down their backs, or the chunk of their shirt that has been torn away by dogs, that they feel the aftershock of fear. She did not hear any dogs on the other side of the wall. So she followed her friend and climbed it, and tumbled down next to her.

Both girls huddled together on the grass with the wall at their back, staring at the battlements and towers rising beyond the ragged lawn before them, gripping each other's hands. Their palms were clammy with excitement and gritty from the dirt of the wall they had just climbed.

"See?" whispered Agatha. "Nobody lives here. Not for years. They're all afraid of *her*."

"Her?" Frannie shivered. This was possibly the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her.

"Lady Caroline. She built the house. And then she died here. In the upstairs room. That one."

Frannie swallowed a scream. She'd seen a curtain move, right where her friend had pointed. "Aggie," she said, willing the words past the tightness in her throat, "let's go. What if someone lives here after all? Look, see, the gravel's been raked."

"The gardeners," Aggie said sepulchrally. "But they won't stay here after dark. Because of the ghosts. Just like in your story, only real. And we're going to see one. Unless you really want to go home now, of course."

"No." Francesca swallowed mightily. Her cousin was the only friend she'd made in the city so far. "I'm game."

They edged along to the stables, where Aggie found an ancient ladder. They half dragged, half carried it over the grass, trying to avoid splinters and discovery—although, of course, no one was there. Aggie laid her hand on the side of the house; the stone was cracked with frost and lichen. "I feel a deathly chill."

"Naturally." Now that they were there, it was do or die. They positioned the ladder under the window of Lady Caroline's room. It reached to the sill, settling into the stone in a comforting way.

"Hold the ladder," said Aggie; "I'm going up. If I see a ghost, I'll hoot like an owl."

"No you won't, you'll scream. I want to go first."

"If you see a ghost, you'll faint."

Frannie said with dignity, "I do not ever, ever faint."

Now was not the time to mention she was afraid of heights. Just think of it as a tower, she told herself, a tower with a princess at the top who needs rescuing. She put her feet on the first rung. It felt reassuringly firm. She reached for the next step. Her skirt was tucked into a pair of canvas gardener's trousers that Aggie had cached with great foresight for their adventure. She could be a cabin boy climbing a ship's rigging. There were no ghosts, not during the day. The curtain had not moved.

There was the window above her, the stone sill within reach of her hands. She stood tiptoe on the ladder, and looked in.

At first she thought he was a statue, leaning back against the elaborate bedpost, pale and beautiful, with ivy twined around his chest. But statues do not have long dark hair that caresses their naked shoulders, nor yet more dark hair springing in a place whose details are usually hidden by drapery. Frannie stared. It occurred to her that this statue looked familiar. He had, in fact, once given her half a cheese tart, and a very fine ghost story of his own.

She tapped softly on the glass. He turned then, his hair whipping behind him, and saw her. He dashed to the window and flung it open and pulled her inside with him.

"Softly!" he said. "We have little time."

"Oh, yes!" she breathed, caught in the story, whatever it was. "I know. How can I help you? What happened to your clothes?"

"My sister took them," he said. "She locked me up in here, and I need to get out."

"My sister did that to me once. She'll get it when your mama finds out."

"I don't think so. But never mind. Give me your breeches."

She scrambled out of the canvas trousers. They came only down to his calves and rested low on his hips, so that the ivy disappeared around his back and down into them behind.

"Wait!" She ran to the window, in time to see Agatha, clutching a stout stick, on her way up to rescue her. "Aggie, back down! It's a friend, he

needs to escape. Hold the ladder below!"

He put his hands on Frannie's shoulders and looked down into her face. "You are a true friend of the Land," he said. "As you have helped me to my kingship, you shall be first among my Companions. My sister has lost that right."

He was out the window before she could ask him what he meant. He really did look like art, especially his chest.

AS THE PROCESSION PASSED THROUGH THE COURT, the crowd moved to fill in behind it. Justis shuffled into a spot behind a short man, and put his arm around Marianne. "Which one's yours?" she asked as the Historians followed their seconds up the steps. "I do hope it's not the squidgy one."

Whatever his feelings about Roger Crabbe, Justis did not like outsiders making judgments. "Doctor Crabbe is the smaller man," he said austerely.

Marianne snorted. "He ought to take a leaf from your man's book and cut his hair short. There's nothing more pitiful than a man with his twelve long hairs bound back in a tail that's thinner than the string."

Justis had been thinking that St Cloud looked different, but hadn't quite known how until Marianne spoke. The familiar sheaf of thick, black hair was gone. With his hair curling at his ears, he looked broader in the jaw, older.

"He's a looker, whatever else he may be," said Marianne.

"Pity the Governors aren't all as susceptible as you," said Justis. "He's going to need all the good will he can get." Even at this distance, he could see that the Master Governor's formal greeting was distinctly warmer for Crabbe than for St Cloud, and that several of the Doctors frowned when St Cloud made his bow to them.

The Master Governor climbed to the speaker's platform and held up his arms. The horns gave one final admonitory blast, and fell silent.

"Fellow scholars and lovers of truth," the Master Governor began. "I welcome you here as witnesses to this debate between two men of learning."

While the Master Governor droned on about the procedure and the nature of the debate, Justis contemplated history and ethics and how the

study of the former had demonstrated the complexity of the latter as the most brilliant lecturer could not. Was it wrong to break a law when the law enforced belief in a lie? What did it matter whether a wizard, dead two hundred years, was a charlatan or the misguided priest of a dying religion? Finally, what did it matter whether magic had been real or not?

He came to himself at a tug on his sleeve. Marianne was growing restless. "Don't he love the sound of his voice, though?" she said scornfully. "Too bad he's the only one that does."

At last the Master Governor entered his peroration, made an end, and stepped down. Doctor St Cloud mounted the platform with no more ceremony than if he'd been mounting the dais in his drafty lecture hall, folded his hands before him, and spoke in a clear, carrying voice, "I call challenge upon Doctor Roger Crabbe. I challenge him on his facts, his reasoning, and his conclusions. The wizards were true wizards, and their power was true magic."

AFTER HIS ORIGINAL SHOCKING STATEMENT, ST CLOUD spoke moderately and well. Nicholas Galing listened with an interest informed by months of Henry's lecture notes while he took his audience back five hundred years and more, to the ancient Kingdom of the North. Everyone there knew of it, of course—the land it comprised was a third of their own country. But few of them knew anything of its history: a mountain kingdom, isolated and rich, protected by warrior kings and ruled by wizards.

"It was not a society in which the written word carried much weight," St Cloud explained. "There are no formal histories, saving Martindale, who is very late, and not even much written poetry or other literature survives from those ancient days. What does survive is lists: of the kings and their battles, of the wizards and their acts, of the villages visited by the kings on their progress, of the children of royal blood. The documents, when studied in conjunction with certain legends, are very suggestive of the role the wizards played in the government of the North."

One by one, St Cloud picked up the strands of his evidence: he cited folk tale, legend, balladry, the chronicle of a foreign prince who had fallen in love with King Martin Swordsmaster and run afoul of his wizard. He

added in harder evidence—the lists, passages from Martindale's *Chronicle of the Wizards and their Deeds*—and wove them together into a tightly argued tapestry that pictured, in colors bright as life, a tableau of wizards who had the power to command both storms and men. He spoke of barren women growing fertile, of rivers no foreign soldier could cross, of hunts through forest and mountain in quest of deer who spoke in the tongues of men. He spoke of kings honored for their potency, and nobles vying for the honor of letting their daughters serve them.

"You may wonder," he said at last, "why I am insisting so strongly upon ancient history when the facts under dispute are so much more recent. My answer to you is this. Our realm, our little world of city, of university, of river, of farmland and upland, of mountain and ravine, did not appear all at once, perfect and whole as we see it today. It grew, as an apple grows, from a seed to a sapling whose branches, cut and grafted onto a sturdier stock, blow blossoms and bear fruit in their season. Our realm is of the Southern Kingdom, which was ruled equally by a monarch and a Council of Nobles. But it is of the Northern Kingdom as well. And, as I have demonstrated, the Northern Kingdom was shaped by magic."

Uneasy murmuring rolled down the banked rows of Doctors and Governors and out into the crowd. Nicholas, who had been listening to St Cloud's argument with growing excitement, felt his blood bubble with joy. Everything up to this point had been so much scholarly flourishing, like the formal moves with which a swordsman begins an exhibition bout. Now the fight was joined in earnest.

"I suggest," Doctor St Cloud went on, calm and steady as before, "that it is illogical to believe that the wizards left their magic behind them when they came South. In fact, there is ample evidence that they continued to cast spells after the Union. The nobility often called on the wizards to clear their wells and bless their fields, even as they petitioned the kings to curtail their political power. For generations, an uneasy truce prevailed, and under it the Kingdom climbed toward a pinnacle of brilliance it was never to know again: the reign of King Anselm, called the Wise.

"Anselm was an innovator, a patron of the arts. And he was a reformer. Influenced by his queen and the Duke of Hartsholt, he divided the wizards from the rest of the court, severely curtailing their political power. He encouraged them to bring their knowledge and skills to this University—

and limited their role in the training and upbringing of the royal children. After Anselm, the wizards' magic seems to have weakened, although they retained enough power to protect their increasingly erratic and unpopular monarchs until David, Duke Tremontaine, found a way to bind them before he killed the last king.

"The form of the binding is instructive: 'He bound them, Duke David of Tremontaine, behind an oaken door chained three times three: locks of iron, of gold, of lead thrice worked, with three great words upon them.' The words are from a popular account, quoted by Vespas in his *Book of Kings*. Master Vespas presents the passage as a quaint metaphor of thoroughness, as a farmer might say he'd harnessed his ox with wood and leather, with collar and nose ring."

He waited for his laugh and got it, but Galing noticed that it was a nervous one—they weren't sure they liked where this was heading. "I present you," St Cloud went on, "with another reading. I believe that David, Duke Tremontaine, bound the wizards into that hall with a spell he may have learned at this very University, where it was once possible to attend lectures in the Arts Magical."

First blood, Nicholas thought. The group of braid-bedecked Northerners gathered at the pedestal of Imagination raised a cheer and their leafy branches. An opposing group booed and catcalled until the Master Governor rose ponderously to his feet and raised his hand for silence. It was a while in coming, but St Cloud, undaunted, lifted his voice above the noise.

"Doctor Crabbe teaches that the wizards after the Union held power through chicanery and corruption alone. Furthermore, he assumes in every lecture he gives that their Northern forebears were charlatans likewise. By ignoring the evidence of the historical record, he paints a false picture of our antecedents, and misprizes the wit and courage of David, Duke Tremontaine, who alone was able to free our land from the tyranny of Gerard the Last King. By this reasoning, I submit to you, my lords, learned Governors, admired doctors of this University, that Doctor Crabbe's scholarship is no such thing."

St Cloud took his seat amid mingled applause and booing, and Nicholas reflected that an academic challenge is not a sword-fight, where the give and take of blows occurs faster than an eye can follow. Now that St Cloud

was no longer speaking, Nicholas could see that he had brought scarcely a single acknowledged authority to bear upon his subject. If this was all he had to go on, then Nicholas could relax. There was no danger of anyone believing him. And there was still no sign of Theron Campion.

DOWN IN THE GREAT COURT, JUSTIS BECAME AWARE of Marianne clinging to his arm, and looked down. Her cheeks were bright, her eyes were opened to their widest extent, and her plump lips were curved in a delighted smile. Feeling her lover's gaze on her, she tilted her head coquettishly. "Why did you say I'd be bored," she demanded. "It's as good as a play. The things he does say! I'd no notion history was so exciting. And those eyes! They burn right into you."

She'd hit it precisely, Justis thought. St Cloud was in his element, lecturing to a class of hundreds. And he was telling the truth at last—triumphantly, defiantly, completely, without hold or stay.

"I collect it's the little one's turn now," Marianne went on. "Don't he look smug—like a cat at a mousehole. He thinks the booing meant they didn't like our man, but he's wrong, isn't he, Justy? It just meant they're scared of him. He'll see."

Watching Crabbe take his place upon the speaker's platform, Justis wondered at the little magister's confidence. Hadn't he been listening? Didn't he know, even if his blindly faithful supporters did not, that he was already beaten? Was it ambition or simple prejudice that allowed him to stand up in front of them all with his narrow chest thrown out, smiling like a man who knows that the dice are loaded?

"You have been told," Crabbe began, "that my scholarship is nothing, that it is founded on faulty evidence—on lies, in fact. Now, it is easy for one man to call another a liar, and no harder for the second man to throw the lie back in the teeth of the first. Schoolyards are full of children whose idea of argument rises no higher than this. But I am not a child. I am a Doctor of History, approved and licensed to teach the history of our noble realm by the illustrious Governors of this ancient University. That alone should shield me from such a challenge to my scholarship and my honor."

It soon became apparent that Crabbe had decided to take the position that St Cloud's challenge was not really worth responding to. He began by rehearsing the death of Gerard and the binding of the wizards as it was recorded by Vespas, who had witnessed it, and Trevor, and "our own august Master Tortua, the current Horn Chair," who had collated all the available sources and commented on them in *Hubris*.

"Shorn of the elaborate figurative language that was such a prominent feature of Late Monarchical prose, the story is a simple one. Twenty-five nobles of the Council of Lords called challenge on Gerard. They fought his Companions, who tried to protect him, and David, Duke Tremontaine, won through to deal the fatal blow. The wizards were not present, Duke David having invited them that night to a great banquet in a pavilion near the oak grove to celebrate the coming of the spring solstice.

"Now," said Crabbe, sweetly reasonable, "you must keep in mind that this was a time of great superstition and general fear. Gerard was quite mad, and his madness manifested in particularly violent and bloody ways. Any man who displeased him in the smallest way might find himself losing his fingers one by one to the axe of the First Companion. If Gerard were more seriously displeased, it would be his toes, his nose, his genitals, oh, and his lands and goods as well. Five years before the Fall, seven nobles had conspired to put a stop to his tyranny, and had come to a nasty end. The uprising failed, leaving disappointingly little evidence behind it. Our only source for it is Vespas, who rather poetically tells us, 'The wizards did reap them as corn is reaped at harvest, and thereafter no blade of grass did grow on their lands for a twelvemonth and a day.' The exact interpretation of this sentence has been the subject of much controversy among later scholars. Trevor had it that…"

Marianne tugged at her lover's sleeve. "Justy?"

"Hmm?"

"Why should scholars argue over the meaning of something that's as plain as the nose on your face?"

Justis, familiar, by this time, with all the arguments Crabbe was citing, drew breath to explain about obscure texts, about interpretation and documentation, and stopped short. He considered what St Cloud had said, what Crabbe was saying, all the books he himself had read over the winter

and the disputes he'd had over their contents, and then he said, "I'm not sure, sweetheart."

"I thought it might be to hear themselves talk, but there must be a better reason than that," she insisted.

"There must be," he agreed. "I'll have to think about it."

And think about it he did, while Crabbe went on with his scholarly digression. When he started listening again, the little magister had returned to David and the wizards.

"Duke David was clever enough to know that the other nobles would never rebel without some assurance that the wizards wouldn't interfere. So he built the famous Spring Pavilion, and invited the wizards to a banquet to consecrate it. When they were all inside, he locked them up, very thoroughly indeed, and set fire to the place. Then he met his fellow conspirators in the Great Court, where you are all standing, and led them into the Great Hall, where they killed the king as I have related. There was nothing more mystical to it than that.

"As for the strength and power of Gerard's wizards, well, that is as much a fairy tale as the legends of talking beasts and living waters Doctor St Cloud was entertaining us with earlier." Crabbe went on to cite the case of the wizard Noris, thrown from the clock tower early in the reign of Gerard Last King, and the wizard Durant, stabbed to death in an alley two years later. "And Doctor St Cloud asks us to believe that men like these, who had proved incompetent even to save their own lives, were masters of a power that could uncover the thoughts of men's hearts and cause grain to sprout in barren land. Before you know it, Doctor St Cloud will be asking us to believe that the wizards meant well, and then, that the kings weren't so bad after all. And if that is so, why were they ever deposed? This line of argument, followed to its logical conclusion, must bring us, and Doctor St Cloud, inevitably to treason."

Pandemonium. Justis found himself shouting, "No! No! Down with Crabbe!" with all the considerable force of his lungs, while behind him a group of men chanted "Crabbe! Crabbe! Crabbe!" in a frenzy of enthusiasm. Marianne was laughing wildly and clapping to the rhythmic roaring around her.

The Master Governor called once more for order, which was even longer in coming than it had been before. Trumpets sounded, people

shouted. Crabbe stood unmoved in the middle of it all, smiling very lightly with his head tipped to one side, the picture of smug triumph.

"There is no question, naturally, of calling Doctor St Cloud a traitor," he said when he'd a hope of being heard. "His colleagues are all aware of his unworldly and unpolitical nature. I do not doubt that he is searching, in his own way, for truth; I only wish to point out that his search has led him into dark and dangerous places. Our esteemed Governors"—he turned to his right and nodded—"have, in their infinite wisdom, decreed what courses of study students shall follow to hone their minds and train them in the skills of scholarship. They have also decreed what texts shall be set, and how they should be studied. My greatest quarrel with Doctor St Cloud in this affair is not that he should impugn my learning and methods, but that in so doing, he should impugn the methods of study laid down by tradition and experience as the best—the only—way of getting at the truth, and to offer in their place old wives' tales and ballads."

"Well, isn't he pleased with himself?" Marianne exclaimed as the little magister stepped down and St Cloud took his place. "Condemning poor Doctor St Cloud with every word he says, all the while swearing he don't mean a thing by it. If he told me I was pretty, I'd watch my purse."

Justis smiled at her gratefully, but his smile was worried. It was going to be difficult for St Cloud to find a defense to Crabbe's words that would cut any ice with the Governors.

FROM HIS VANTAGE POINT RIGHT NEXT TO THOSE Governors, Nicholas Galing was thinking much the same thing. During Crabbe's speech, he'd heard many approving murmurs. Crabbe was telling them what they wanted to hear, making them feel comfortable and justified and pleased with themselves. St Cloud had set them off-balance, questioned the foundations on which their decisions and their University were built, and they resented him for it. The man might as well forfeit his challenge right here and now and slink off into the ignoble exile that was his only possible future.

It was a bit of a surprise to see St Cloud stepping onto the platform looking as calm and assured as if Crabbe had not just knocked his entire

argument into flinders.

"I had hoped," he said, "to be able to make my case by reference to my own period of study alone, without presuming so much on my colleague's territory as to teach him his own subject. I could not believe that he would so fail in his duty as a scholar and a teacher as to present Vespas as his ultimate authority for the events leading up to the Purging of the Wizards and the death of the Tyrant. Vespas did not personally witness those events, but derived his account, at the Council's behest, from a document written by the Crescent Chancellor, the ancestor of the current Lord Condell, who did not witness them either."

Crabbe stood up. "This is ridiculous," he shouted. "Condell interviewed Tremontaine, Perry, and Wellingbrook, all of whom were indisputably there. I hope you're not trying to say that Condell falsified his facts, or that the Liberators were lying to him?"

Basil turned to him with restrained dignity. "Doctor Crabbe. You may challenge me all you like on my facts, my scholarship, and my reasoning—that is, after all, the purpose of this debate—but please wait your turn, as I did mine."

Nicholas, who had a tolerably clear view of Crabbe, saw his second pull insistently on his sleeve. The little magister glared down at his friend with narrowed eyes, then flung up his hands and sat down with an air of utter disgust.

"Thank you," said St Cloud tranquilly. "Doctor Crabbe is correct. Lord Condell's account of the death of Gerard was indeed compiled with the help of the king's surviving executioners. However, I am in a position to prove that document does not represent the most authentic account of those events. In the Archives of this very University, there exists a letter from Duke David himself, addressed to the University Librarian, one Carrington." Calmly, he pulled a yellowed paper from a small portfolio, and handed it to Leonard Rugg. "Perhaps the esteemed Governers would care to examine it to ascertain its authenticity?" Rugg opened it, and stared; without comment he handed it to the row behind him. "I will describe the contents, for those who can't see it," Basil went on. "In it, the Liberator thanks Carrington for searching out the *Spell for Binding a Renegado*, and for discovering the circumstances under which it might be executed."

St Cloud paused to let the implications of this sink in. When the murmuring started, he spoke over it, quoting the salient points of Duke David's letter, including a paragraph in which the duke warned his friend that he would find the official version of the Purging of the Wizards a little different from what he might expect. "*The Northern magics proving a wild and unchancy force,*" the duke wrote, "*we have determined to purge them as well as their unhappy acolytes from this our fair land, so that no wizard may rise to practice upon us again.*"

Crabbe was on his feet before the end of the sentence. "Doctor St Cloud, what kind of mockery are you trying to make of this debate?"

St Cloud turned to face his rival. "Why, Doctor Crabbe, I am but putting forth evidence and authority, as you wished."

"Evidence?" Crabbe shrilled. "Authority? I'll need a lot more proof, Doctor St Cloud, before I accept the authority of such a convenient and unconvincing document. Furthermore, I do not see that this letter, even if it is indeed what you say it is, changes the facts of the case in any way. There is nothing in Duke David's words to support the interpretation you have put on them."

St Cloud made as if to answer, but Crabbe shouted him down. "This debate was your challenge, St Cloud, not mine—but I challenge you anew: I call you a liar, with no more respect for history than a penny balladeer!"

"Do you say so?" St Cloud answered quietly.

"You know you are," Crabbe hissed. "Everything you've laid out before us is so much rubbish dug from the refuse heap of the past, a rotting pile of used papers and moldy documents you wish to dignify with the title of History. Perhaps you also want everyone to study the Condell laundry lists from the last hundred years? Or letters from some king to his whore? You claim, because these things exist, are even in some way *true*, you dare to claim that such trivia, such garbage, makes up our sacred History! A very pretty magic, indeed, St Cloud, to turn the dross of a disturbed mind into the gold of true scholarship."

St Cloud had been listening to this diatribe with his hands tucked into the long green sleeves of his gown. From the crowd, he probably looked as serene as he had throughout the debate, but Nicholas could see the tremors shaking the heavy folds that fell from his shoulders. The Master Governor was on his feet, sputtering that Crabbe was out of order, that

decorum must be maintained, but no one was paying him any attention. For a moment, the two men stood confronted, Crabbe panting and slit-eyed with passion, St Cloud furiously restrained. And then St Cloud drew forth from his sleeve a small, fat, dark book. He opened it, turned over two or three pages, ran his finger down the text, found his place, and raised his voice once more.

"If it is history you demand, Roger Crabbe, then I will give you history, pure and unmediated by commentary or the passage of years. This book is the Book of the King's Wizard. And I will show you true magic now: *A Spelle to call upp the Beeste in a Man, Eche According to Hys Nature*. Listen, Crabbe, and learn."

He's mad, Nicholas thought reflexively, and then, with a rush of elation: *I knew it!* And then he thought nothing at all, pinned in place by the strange words, ponderous and loud as thunder, that rolled from St Cloud's lips. Like a rising tide, they flowed on and outward, gathering force and substance, pouring over Crabbe and his second, over the Doctors and Governors and over Nicholas himself, out over the crowd, the Northerners, the Scholars, the Fellows, and all the tradesmen and servants whose world was the University.

Crabbe began to growl and snarl. The voice rolled on; Crabbe crouched down and launched himself at St Cloud. Contemptuously, St Cloud kicked him aside, and he yipped and retreated to a safe distance, from where he barked defiance. The Master Governor swung his head heavily from side to side and let forth a long, unhappy bellow.

Nicholas stood bewildered by the scents that suddenly assailed his nose: the scent of prey—of poultry, of dogs and horses and small, frightened rabbits and mice and somewhere, far off and coming closer, a royal stag. Water sprang to his mouth, but the presence of other predators constrained and confused him. Their stench was rank in his nostrils: hawks and hunting cats and swift-footed foxes. A brown mare stood behind him, watching him gravely from wise, dark eyes. And then he knew that the brown mare was Katherine, Duchess Tremontaine, and that he was not a wolf at all, but Lord Nicholas Galing, who, whatever else he might be, had a wolf's heart and a wolf's hunger.

Out in the Court, Justis planted himself sturdily at his mate's side and growled low in his throat. It was puzzling that his mate should smell like a robin, but she was his to guard, and guard her he would until his last breath. The weasel near him recoiled, then turned into a Fellow with yellow bands on his sleeves and blank fear on his face. Justis shook his head, half-expecting to feel the pull and swing of dewlaps against a sturdy muzzle, then rubbed his face.

Small, trembling fingers plucked at his sleeve. "Justy?" piped a little voice, "What was that, Justy?"

He put his arms around her, his little robin, his sweet girl, and felt her shudder with the force of her heartbeats. "I'm not sure, love," he said. "But it may very well have been magic."

Henry Fremont shuddered convulsively from head to toe and examined his hands. Had they indeed been hooves only a moment ago, and had he really been ready to kick in the brains of the high-bred hunting dog shivering and whining beside him? He worked his fingers and snuck a look at Godwin, who whimpered as if the fit were still upon him.

Vandeleur's voice sounded in his ear, shaky and hoarse. "I thought… Never mind what I thought. Are you well, Fremont?"

"No," said Henry frankly. "But I'm better than Godwin here."

"See to him, will you?" said Vandeleur. "You're closest. Land, I miss Justis."

Jessica Campion shivered with the notion that she could fly, fly with a hawk's grace and sureness out over the square below her, riding on the currents of the peoples' awe and fury as they eddied up to her. Her knuckles gripped the railing. She had been within an inch of casting herself from the gallery of the Great Hall. But from there with her hawk's eyes, she saw what no one else could see: a single man entering the plaza, a man naked to the waist, his chest bound with oak and ivy, his hair flowing free around him. She did not jump, but hastened down the conventional way.

FROM HIS PLACE ON THE STEPS, GALING, TOO, HAD A good view of the square. He saw the crowds parting, parting like grass in the wind to let the man pass through them. Some people jeered and laughed; others shouted warnings. A few people were ignoring the man altogether, holding on to themselves as if they were afraid they'd shiver into pieces, their faces shocked or streaked with tears. By this, Nicholas knew that what he had just felt, others had felt as well.

The man, of course, was Theron Campion. Not off in the country after all. Just where he was, he did not seem aware himself. He strode through the crowd now as if it really were a field of grass, wearing nothing but a pair of rough breeches, his decorated chest bared for the world to see. Nicholas smiled with grim fascination.

Lord Theron's chest flashed in and out; he had been running. But now he approached the steps with a gliding, measured pace, his head held high, his eyes fixed on his lover, Basil St Cloud.

A year ago, Nicholas would have been anticipating a scene out of a bad melodrama: a lover's quarrel grown into a public scandal, with one or both of the participants driven mad by love. But Nicholas had lost the comfortable certainty that he knew how the world worked. A moment ago, St Cloud had produced a wizard's book and read from it, and something had happened. Nicholas hadn't known about the book. But the rest of it—that St Cloud fancied himself a wizard and Theron his sacred king—he had deduced from the evidence he'd collected for Arlen. Arlen, who was not present at the debate. Lord Arlen, the Serpent Chancellor. Other Council posts passed from man to man, but the Serpent was always Arlen.

Over by the statue of Imagination, the Northerners had set up some kind of chant. He couldn't catch the words, but he would bet anything it had to do with kings. Crabbe's followers were shouting, "Foul!"; a fight had broken out in a corner of the plaza. He heard a woman's voice cry, "Theron!" and saw the ranks of Doctors shift as Lady Sophia struggled through them toward her son.

Ignoring it all, Theron saw the man who waited for him on the steps. His lover was the man in his dreams, the man in the wood, the man with the knife and the pelt of a bear. His lover was his teacher and his magister, who had filled him all winter with his magic, and waited for him now to

achieve his trial and take up his new responsibility. Theron climbed the steps and knelt before him and looked up into his face.

Basil smiled, intimate and loving, as if they two were alone in the world. "It is well that you kneel, my king. For it is the time of Sowing. The time of testing is done, and now the Land may rejoice in you."

From inside his robe he drew forth a chain, the gold chain that Theron had given him in love. He lifted the chain in both hands so that the sun ran like fire through its heavy links. "And now," he said, "be bound to the Land: blood and bone, beast and man, until the day of your death and ever afterward."

The tableau held for a moment, still and bright as the painted glass window in the Great Hall above them, gesture for gesture and pose for pose: the black-robed wizard holding aloft the blinding gold chain, the young king kneeling before him to receive its weight.

The picture was not lost on the crowd in the plaza. "Look!" Nicholas heard the cries from the crowd, and saw what he had feared: a legend being brought out of the shadows and into the world.

He had no more time, now. This is what he had been sent for. Arlen's last words to him rang clearly and precisely in his head: "Have you come across anything in your investigation to convince you that magic exists?"

Arlen had not said, "I do not believe in magic." He had asked a question, and Nicholas had answered it with a diplomatic lie. Now was the moment for him to return a true answer. If he was wrong, he would face disgrace, banishment, death. But if he was right, he would be as great a liberator as the great Duke David—even if only one man ever knew the truth.

His knife in his hand, Nicholas Galing leapt forward to kill the king.

HE'D HAD TRAINING WITH A KNIFE, OF COURSE—anyone who carried a knife without knowing how to use it was a danger chiefly to himself. But he'd never really used it on a man before. Galing had time to be amazed at how easy he found it to stab into living flesh again and again before he was caught and held fast by two horrified magisters. His hands were sticky with blood, his face and coatsleeves spattered with it. He was sweating and

panting as if he'd been running. He heard people sobbing and wailing, and shouting for order or for help. Roger Crabbe was yelling, "What is it? What happened? We must finish the debate! Where is St Cloud?"

Basil St Cloud could not answer him. He lay on the steps un-hearing, surrounded by Doctors of Physic. But even the immense bounty of their knowledge was helpless against the wounds he had taken. It had happened too quickly. There was no breath left in him now, no thought, no life. His heart and mind had stopped together.

And Theron Campion lay bloody across his mother's lap. She was muttering, very softly and quickly, a stream of words in a language no one understood, and twisting the cloth of her robes and petticoats around the gashes in his body, as the blood kept welling through. Nicholas Galing had managed to do a lot of damage with his dagger between the time that Basil had flung himself in front of Theron and the nearest scholars had realized what was happening and pulled him off them both.

"Sophia."

She did not look up. "Jessica. More bandages."

Jessica leaned down, handed her a sash. "Sophia. They are taking Galing away. Say the word, and I'll do for him now."

Sophia shook her head, twisting the sash. "Put your hand here—right here, and press hard."

Jessica was used to blood. "I know."

Leonard Rugg stood by Basil's body, spinning like a top, looking for something, someone who could do something. He didn't know who, and he didn't know what, but there must be something. Cassius and Elton were holding his shoulders, saying his name and Basil's, and then he saw what he was looking for: the men, the young men, the flowers of scholarship, the fruit of Basil's garden, they were here, fighting toward him through the swirling crowd, and he called to them, "Men! Men! Don't let this be for nothing!"

Lord Edmond Godwin saw his son, Peter, all childhood gone from his face. He seized the boy's arm, saying, "We must go; this is going to get worse."

But Peter shook his head. "You go," he said through tear-swollen lips. "Tell them what happened here. You saw. Tell them, Father. Tell them."

Lord Edmond looked out over the square. "The Guard is coming, not a moment too soon. Peter—"

And then he shouted, because one of Peter's friends, a scrawny scarecrow of a fellow, had hurled himself in the direction of Lord Nicholas Galing. "You fools!" Lord Edmond bellowed to Galing's captors. "Get him out of here *now*! Can't you see what will happen? *Now*, I say!"

A big student wrestled down the scrawny one with Peter's help, and all Edmond's attention fell to clearing a path and giving commands to move and secure Galing inside the Great Hall, where they could wait while order was restored to the riot brewing outside.

But save for the main participants in the drama, the witnesses to the debate had little stomach for riot. As the City Guard marched into the square, the people dispersed, leaving a clear path to the steps. And the Guard themselves parted to admit a sweating horseman in Council livery, who delivered his message to Lord Edmond as the man in charge: Lord Nicholas Galing was to be transported directly to Arlen House, there to answer to the Serpent himself.

The great Doctor Tortua, Horn Chair Doctor of History, author of *Hubris and the Fall of the Kings*, looked down on the milling, muttering Doctors and Governors, on the Guards and nobles, students and shopkeepers, the dead man and the dying. Of all of them there, only he had come close to knowing what Basil St Cloud had known. He no longer remembered who St Cloud was, but he recognized what he had just witnessed as a page of his beloved ancient history, torn from the Archives and enacted on the bright courtyard steps like some schoolboy pageant.

He waited a long time, until he realized that there was to be no more ceremony, no more speeches, no more challenge or sacrifice, and that the beautiful lady who had held his arm was not coming back either. Doctor Tortua turned away in dismay.

"They got it wrong," the old scholar said, disappointed. "They got it all wrong."

chapter VIII

THE GREEN MAN WAS TOO PUBLIC, COPPICE'S room too small, so the Northerners went to earth in the oak grove. Tamed and threatened by the city though it was, the grove still felt more like home than any other place in this uncaring South. They might rage there, and huddle among the roots of ancient trees and mourn the death of all their hopes.

Lindley was with them, weeping convulsively in the arms of a man whose name he did not know. Basil St Cloud was dead, and Lindley had seen him die, watched him leap into the path of the assassin's knife and receive it in his breast, his neck. He'd seen the blood and the pain in his magister's face, and it hadn't been beautiful or noble or romantic. It had been horrible. And now it was over—Basil St Cloud was over—and Anthony Lindley was feeling such pain as he had never felt before, not when Finn had died, not even in the Chop.

"Steady, steady," the man murmured. "Remember you're a warrior, a King's Companion. The battle goes on, though the king is dead."

Lindley sat up at that, wet-faced. "I don't care about Campion," he gasped. "He never understood any of it. Kings come and go, or they would if there were any. It's wizards that are important, and the last one is dead, and I loved him."

The Northerner shrugged himself away from Lindley and got up. "Suit yourself, Southron," he said.

Forlorn, Lindley hugged his knees and watched as the Northerners drifted in ones and twos to the center of the clearing. This was where he'd found Finn, and where they'd built the fire and danced at MidWinter. He had understood then, or thought he did. His blood had certainly understood, igniting his flesh so that he had felt himself a lantern, a torch flaming with wisdom and joy and love. It was what Lindley had loved in

Alaric, the burning intensity of his belief in the old ways; in possessing him, Lindley possessed the secrets, the history, the magic of the ancient North, his true heritage.

The Northmen had linked arms, and were circling slowly, heads bowed so that their braids fell down over their faces. After a time, they stopped, and drew the knives from their belts. Coppice stepped inward and held the edge of his knife over his outstretched arm.

"It is the time of Sowing," he said formally. "If we are to have a merry Harvest, the Land must have its mede of blood to quicken it. Lacking a king, the ritual has fallen on the Companions as it has for these many years. This Spring, we had hoped for a true king to lead us, but he was killed before we might even greet him.

"Perhaps this is not an age for kings. But as long as there are Companions to perform the ritual, we will perform it, and the Land will prosper."

He brought the edge of the knife down on his forearm and sliced open a shallow cut that bled freely.

"We give our life's blood to you," he said. "Drink well. Bear well. Love us as we love you."

One by one, the Northerners cut their arms and spoke their prayers and let their blood fall on the bright new grass. At some point, Lindley went to the circle and drew his knife and touched the shoulder of Burl, who was Second Companion and had the right to refuse or accept him. Burl hesitated a long moment, then moved aside to give Lindley a place. And when the time came, Lindley cut his arm and said the ritual in a steady voice, and lay with Burl afterward, as the custom was, and kissed each man on the mouth. For all the magic that was left in the Southland was here, and he wanted to be a part of it, as it had become a part of him.

But when the ritual was done and the Northerners began to talk of practical matters—whether the guard would arrest Coppice and his second, what to do about Greenleaf and Smith—Anthony Lindley left the grove and returned to the city and university that were his home.

THREE WOMEN STOOD WATCH OVER THERON CAMPION as his fragile flesh swung his soul between the worlds of life and death. His breathing was shallow but even, punctuated by little moans of pain he did not know that he was making. His mother sat beside him, taking his pulse and feeling his brow, feeding him liquid when he would take it. If there was infection, she might not save him, but she had cleaned the wounds and bandaged him with fresh linen.

"The knife was clean," Jessica said again. "What else would Galing use it for? Opening letters? He was no swordsman. Anyway, I have it. With his crest. He'll hang. Katherine, you'll see to that, I hope?"

"I don't know." The duchess was barely aware of what she said; she was watching the boy on the bed. "I'll need to know more. Arlen will find out."

Theron was so pale—so different, Sophia thought, from the color he'd been born, all fiercely red and blue. She took his hand and sang a song about a little boy and a goat on a sunny hillside. While he still breathed, it would not make her weep.

"Kyros," Jessica said, hearing her voice. "I remember. I visited my father and Richard there, and the cook sang me that song." She knelt by the bed. "Sophia. Shall I take you home?"

Sophia shook her head, kept singing. His eyes behind the thin lids were moving. "Come back," she sang, the song of the boy to his goats. "Come back and we'll have honey cakes." Come back, my son, from the land that has possessed you, the land that drank your blood. Come back from whatever you are looking for, whatever you are running from. Come back to those who truly love you, and we will kiss you and let you go where you will.

"He should go to Kyros," Katherine said.

Sophia shook her head again. "I want him to lie by his father."

"Not yet," said the duchess; "it isn't time for that yet. I mean when he is better. When Jessica leaves. You go with her. I'll take care of things here."

Jessica chuckled. "Lovely. A ship full of mythic paintings, plus the genuine article."

"Kyros." Sophia trilled the "r" like a bird. "We begot him there, on a festival night. My husband didn't want a child, but I called him forth because I knew it was time."

"He should go back," Katherine said again. "Not forever, but for a little while. I hear the climate's nice." She smiled. "And people will forget, here."

"Will they?" asked Sophia, doubtful. "Perhaps we go into exile, as his father did after the disgrace."

Katherine came behind and leaned her cheek on Sophia's hair. "I was a girl then," she said. "I didn't know what else to do. I've learned a few things since then. Take him and heal him if you can, and let me do the rest."

"Kyros," Sophia trilled softly and in her own tongue she said, "Theron. Come home with me."

Jessica had been pacing the room; it was hard for her to be still in the fog of pain and love. She went out into the hall, nodding her head for Katherine to follow her.

"Well?" said the duchess. "I know it may not be on your way…"

"Ask me." Jessica stood still, but she twisted her fingers together. "Just ask me."

Katherine drew a deep breath. "Is Kyros on your way?"

"Not really."

"Will you take them there?"

"Maybe."

"Jessica."

"This once, just ask me for something I can actually give you."

"Will you take them both? Please."

"Yes." Jessica turned away to hide the fact that she was weeping. "Good God," she said brightly, and cleared her throat. "What's this?"

It was a package, tall and square, wrapped in cloth and twine. All too familiar.

"It came this morning," the duchess said. "I forgot all about it. Someone's left it here in the hall. They shouldn't have. I'll have it cleared away—"

"The devil," Jessica muttered, and cut the twine with her knife and pulled away the wrappings.

Theron looked out from the canvas, splendid in peacock blue. He was sitting at a table piled with fruit and books; one hand rested on an open page, the other touched his throat, where a jewel gleamed among the folds of white under his beautifully articulated fingers. Behind him, an open window showed the lawns of Tremontaine House.

"Damn her cheek." Katherine stared. "It's the portrait I commissioned."

"Well," said Jessica. "I hope you didn't pay her in advance."

ONCE AGAIN LORD NICHOLAS GALING FOUND himself in Arlen House in the salon overlooking the river in which he had waited for Lord Arlen more than once since autumn. This time, he was accompanied by a pair of City Guards, and his hands were bound behind him. Nobody had very much to say, least of all Galing himself. He was half-sick on the dregs of violent action and the knowledge that he had gambled everything on a single, daring cast and could not tell how the dice had fallen.

The same soft-footed servant who had waited on Galing in palmier days slid into the room and said, "Lord Arlen will see Lord Nicholas now. No need for you gentlemen to wait. Lord Arlen's men can see to him from here."

The same shadowy halls, the same paneled library, softly awash in the clear light of a perfect spring afternoon. The servant piloted Galing to a chair and helped him sit, conscious of a bound man's difficulty keeping his balance. He did not offer to remove Galing's bonds, nor did he offer refreshment. Galing found his heart pounding with the beginnings of panic.

"Lord Nicholas," a familiar voice purred. "How nice to see you. Montjoy, you may leave us. Is my swordsman at the door? Good. I'll call if I need him."

Lord Arlen came around his desk and stood in front of the chair Galing sat in, so close that Nicholas was forced to tilt his head uncomfortably to meet those amused gray eyes.

"I understand you've given me a gift, Lord Nicholas: Basil St Cloud's heart on a platter."

It was hard to see his face from this angle, harder to read his drawling voice. The words were ironic, but then Arlen was always ironic. Everything was a test. Nicholas felt very tired.

"I did it for you," he said flatly. "It was the answer to the question you asked me."

"Ah," said Arlen. "I see. You unmasked the last wizard, and you killed him. And you did it for me. I'm flattered."

The smooth voice had deepened, grown rougher. Warmth? Anger? Galing couldn't tell. Arlen reached out a well-tended hand and brushed at his cheek. "There's blood on your face, did you know? On the whole, you've

done very well. You didn't allow predjudice to stand in the way of the facts, and you recognized the truth when you saw it."

"Thank you," said Nicholas stiffly. "Are you going to untie me?"

"Dear Montjoy. Such a cautious man." Arlen collected a knife from his desk—a slender, jeweled toy—and bent over the young noble to cut his ropes. Galing felt his breath warm on the nape of his neck and his fingers cool against his wrists, and then Arlen was across the room, pouring out a glass of wine while Galing rubbed at his bruises and got his breathing under control.

"Drink this," Arlen said, "and tell me what happened. I've only got the most garbled accounts."

So Nicholas delivered his report and sipped at his wine, and began to entertain hopes that the dice had fallen well after all. When he'd made an end, he felt in his pocket and drew out a heavy golden chain.

"St Cloud dropped it when I stabbed him, and I caught it without thinking. You should have it." Belatedly, he noticed that its links were dark and sticky with blood. "It's a bit of a mess, I'm afraid."

"Disgusting," Arlen agreed, but his expression was not disgusted. He looked up from the chain dangling from Galing's stained hand and his eyes were heavy and approving. "Why don't we go clean it up, and I can thank you properly."

LORD ARLEN'S THANKS WERE ALL NICHOLAS GALING had dreamed they would be. There were moments during that long and magnificent night when Nicholas thought he might die of pleasure. When at last he lay sated, with Arlen's corded arm thrown across his chest, he knew he'd won the throw.

"Lovely Nicholas," Arlen said. "You will always serve me, will you not?"

"To my last breath," Nicholas declared, meaning it absolutely.

"Good. I shall hold you to that." Arlen sat up among the pillows and stretched. "There's going to be some unpleasantness ahead for you, and I'd hate for you to think it was for nothing."

The warm, heavy stupor of sexual satisfaction receded a little. Nicholas turned over to face the Serpent Chancellor. "Unpleasantness?"

"Your trial for the murder of Basil St Cloud, and possibly of Lord Theron Campion, if he succumbs to his wounds. You didn't really think, did you, that you could get away with striking down two men in front of the entire University without anyone's taking notice?"

Nicholas sat up in a surge of bedclothes. "The man was talking treason—hell, he was performing treason. They both were. Everyone there saw it, but no one did anything about it but me. Damn it, I'm a hero!"

"So you are, my dear. So you are. I know that and you know that. But no one else had the information to thoroughly understand what was going on. They saw a noble run amok, attacking two harmless members of an august institution without so much as the courtesy of a formal challenge. For you to be a hero, the Council of Nobles must explain why your action was heroic. You're a clever man. You understand why we cannot do that."

Nicholas understood perfectly.

THE DAY AFTER THE HISTORIANS' DEBATE, THE tattered remnants of St Cloud's class came slinking one by one into the Blackbird's Nest. There were more of them than one might have expected, gathered around their usual tables, talking quietly. They toasted the magister's memory in ale, and stole respectful glances at Historians' Corner, where the inner circle, or what was left of it, sat in grim contemplation of their shattered lives.

"Where's Justis?" Peter Godwin asked for the tenth time. "Justis ought to be here."

"It's that damned girl," Henry began fretfully, but Vandeleur stopped him.

"Screw the girl," he said. "Screw Justis. He made his choice when he scuttled off without even staying to see whether the magister was alive or dead. He didn't come home last night, and I hope he has the sense to stay as far away as possible for as long as possible, because I swear if I see him, I'll break his clod-hopper's neck for him."

"I'll help you," Henry offered, but his heart wasn't in it.

They subsided into a depressed silence, broken by Godwin. "What are we going to do now?"

"The magister's scarcely cold," Vandeleur said brutally. "I don't much feel like doing anything."

"I don't either, but that's not the point," Godwin said. "He was right, don't you see? Even before what happened happened, everybody knew he was right. But now he's dead, they'll try to hush it up and lie about it, like Duke David and Condell. We can't just sit here drinking and moaning and let that happen."

"Well said, Godwin," someone agreed; the three friends jumped, then frowned when they saw that the newcomer was Anthony Lindley. He still wore his hair in Northern braids, but he'd lost the strained, glittering intensity that had made him so difficult these past weeks.

"Get stuffed, Lindley," said Henry, who was not of a forgiving nature.

Lindley was unmoved. "I understand you're angry with me. I don't blame you. But we have to stay together. The truth is important—Doctor St Cloud taught us that—and it's going to take all of us to see to it that it doesn't disappear."

Vandeleur eyed him with small favor. "Does this mean you're giving up your Northern friends? No more oak leaves? No more hunts in the wood?"

"No, Vandeleur, it doesn't. The Northerners are my friends. Furthermore, I believe, as they do, in the divinity of the Land. You have no right to ask me to abandon them, any more than they have a right to ask me to abandon you. I don't see why being a Companion of the King should keep me from being a historian. Quite the contrary."

There was a pregnant pause while everyone thought about this, and then Godwin moved over on the bench and Lindley sat down beside him. Vandeleur called for another tankard, and the conversation resumed, with more spirit than before.

"I suppose we're going to have to try and reproduce his scholarship," Vandeleur said doubtfully.

"We can't," Henry objected. "You have to have permission to get into the Archives, and you can be sure after yesterday, the Governors are going to start making all sorts of rules the point of which is to keep out any historians whose politics are not guaranteed to be respectable. Which isn't any of us."

"There's plenty we can find without ever going in the Archives," Godwin said.

"But we can't teach unless we're Doctors," Henry went on, "and we can't become Doctors without a sponsor, and who's going to sponsor us? Crabbe?"

Vandeleur ground his teeth audibly. "Why don't you go ask him, Fremont? Then he'll hand you over to the authorities and we won't have to put up with your whining anymore."

"I'm just trying to inject a note of common sense into the discussion," Henry protested.

"You're just trying to make us feel worse than we do already," said Godwin. "Why don't you go away, if you think it's all so hopeless?"

Henry looked around him at the stern faces of his three closest friends and his throat closed with grief, or perhaps it was fury, so that he must weep or beat the disgust from their faces. He had half risen from his seat, undecided whether to launch himself at Vandeleur, who was nearest, or make a dignified exit, when a large and familiar hand took him by the shoulder and a deep and familiar voice said, "Shut up, Henry, and sit down. We've got a lot to talk about."

JUSTIS BLAKE HAD HAD A DIFFICULT TWENTY-FOUR hours. He had not slept since St Cloud was killed, and he looked as though he'd been climbing walls and hiding in cellars, which was, in fact, exactly what he'd been doing.

"The first thing I thought of was his books and papers," he explained to the four friends. "Sooner or later, the Governors or someone would have come and taken them away and probably burned them, and I couldn't bear for that to happen. It would have been like killing him twice."

He stopped and blinked away the tears that had been surprising him at intervals all night. He'd found himself weeping in a back alley where he'd hidden to avoid the Guard, and again standing in St Cloud's room, seeing the inkwell still half-full, the hairs still in the comb, the notes on the pages left on the table: Look *up? Compare R's version?* It was not so much embarrassing as inconvenient, distracting him from the task at hand. Which, just now, was to persuade four skeptical and grief-stricken men that, despite appearances, he was really on their side.

"As if you cared two pins about St Cloud," Henry Fremont sneered. "You haven't been around for weeks—couldn't even be bothered to come with us yesterday morning, or stand with us, or—"

"Yes, I know," Justis interrupted impatiently. "I was confused. But it's not important now. What's important is that it all not be for nothing—Doctor St Cloud's work and the debate and all. Now, I have all his books and his papers…"

They all exclaimed at that, incredulous, jealous that they hadn't thought of it themselves, excited at the possibilities, nervous of the consequences. Vandeleur wanted to hear how he'd done it; Godwin wanted to know where he'd stashed them; Fremont hoped the girl hadn't had anything to do with it: women could never keep secrets. Lindley swept the room with a suspicious eye and said they'd better not talk of it in such a public place.

"No," Justis said. "A public place is just where we must speak of it. There have been enough secrets and mysteries. The more people who know about all this, the better. This is the Blackbird's Nest, man. It's full of historians and metaphysicians. It's in their interest to support us, not turn us in."

"Us," said Henry. "Who is us? I thought you were sick of scholars and University and anything that didn't put food on the table."

"I thought I was, too," Justis said. "I was wrong. I'm going to take my degree in history, using St Cloud's methods, and I'm going to become a Fellow and then a Doctor, and I'm going to teach ancient history the way Doctor St Cloud taught it, without lies."

There was a stunned silence. "Right," Godwin said. "And I'm going to be Dragon Chancellor."

"No," Lindley said slowly, "he could do it. With the sources he'd found and his notes—you did get all the notes, didn't you?—and if Godwin here can persuade his father to talk some of the Governors around…"

"We still need a sponsor," Fremont pointed out.

Vandeleur and Godwin answered as one: "Rugg."

"He's always held that History and Metaphysics were closely allied," Vandeleur explained.

"And he called on us for revenge," Godwin said. "You remember, Vandeleur, on the steps, when, when…"

They did, indeed, remember, although they had temporarily lost sight of it in the excitement of Justis Blake's revelations. The horror of Basil St

Cloud's death fell on them afresh at Godwin's words, and they sat in silence, fighting or surrendering to their grief according to their several natures. Justis knew he had not loved St Cloud as the rest had. In his eight months as a historian, he had been dazzled, charmed, inspired, and deeply disappointed by the young magister's romantic devotion to the past. But the flame St Cloud had carried was a true flame, and its light should not pass from the world.

Justis wiped his eyes and beckoned to the potboy. "I know you've got good wine here," he said. "You keep it for the magisters. You'd give it to Doctor St Cloud, if he asked for it. We'd like a bottle to drink to his memory."

The boy looked doubtful. "Can you pay for it?"

Justis reached for his purse to check, but Godwin said thickly, "Yes. Just get it. The best you have."

When the boy was gone, Henry said, "What about the papers? Did you take them to your rooms?"

"No. I didn't think Vandeleur would let me in, and I didn't feel like arguing."

Vandeleur slugged him on the arm. "Clodpole," he said affectionately. "I'd have killed you first, and argued later."

"Just so, hot-head. And I wanted them out of University, in case there was a search."

"The Book," Lindley asked eagerly, "the spellbook—it wasn't there, was it?"

"How do you imagine it would have gotten there, dolt?" asked Henry. "Magic?"

There was an uncomfortable silence while everyone remembered that magic was no longer a joke, and then Justis said, "There were some notebooks, a lot of loose papers—nothing like the book Henry and I saw him with a couple of weeks ago."

Godwin looked indignant. "You went to see him? When he'd specifically asked us to leave him alone? Without telling us? Why?"

Justis caught Henry's darting glance and held it steadily. "I'd overheard something I thought he should know. It doesn't matter now." He turned deliberately to Godwin. "He had a book in his hands—fat and dark, the same book he read from on the steps."

"It's probably ashes by now," Henry said. "And good riddance to it."

"So," persisted Godwin, "where'd you take them?"

Justis glanced around the tavern, growing noisy now as conversations began to wander from the debate onto other subjects. No one was paying Historians' Corner the least bit of attention. He leaned forward. "Marianne's hiding them in her shop, at the bottom of a box of ribbons."

The students were speechless. Finally, Vandeleur found his voice. "You hid Doctor St Cloud's papers and notes in a box of *ribbons?*"

"The ribbons are of unfashionable colors," Justis reassured them. "No one's likely to disturb them, and they'll be safe until the dust has settled."

He glared at Henry, daring him to say something about women or milliners, but Henry, mindful of the wisdom of being civil, said, "I'm sure Mistress Marianne will guard them well. What does she think, by the way, of this plan of yours to take the scholarly world by storm?"

"She's for it," Justis said. "We talked about it last night. We're going to get married and set her up in a shop of her own with my wedding portion and she can support us until I start getting students."

"How nice for her," Henry said, rather sourly. The congratulations of the others weren't much more effusive. It was all too much to take in and respond to. It would take weeks and months before they could think of St Cloud, or even of Ancient History, without being dogged by a shadow of horror and grief.

Max himself arrived with a bottle of wine and six glasses on a tray. It was a Deerfield red, very fine indeed. As Godwin fumbled at his purse strings, Max said, "It's on the house. The Doctor brought in good custom and always paid his tab. He'll be missed."

When Max had poured the wine, with a glass for himself, the five Ancient Historians lifted their glasses, self-conscious, sad, aware that this moment marked a change in their lives whose repercussions they could not imagine. Expectant, they looked at Vandeleur.

"Blake," Vandeleur said. "Will you offer the toast?"

Justis allowed himself a moment of astonished dismay at his sudden change of status. This is what it was going to be like from now on, and he'd brought it on himself. He stood and raised his glass to the table and his voice to be heard over the tavern noise. "Gentlemen," he said, and paused while the conversations around him ebbed. "Doctor Basil St Cloud was

great of mind and great of heart, an adventurer in the forest of Truth. He perished on the journey, but left a path for us to follow—not historians alone, but all of us, humane scientists, natural scientists, every scholar and fellow of this University. Our most fitting memorial to him is to walk the path he blazed. Gentlemen, I give you Basil St Cloud, first Doctor of Empirical Studies."

He lifted the scarlet liquid to his lips and took a respectful swallow—even a country boy knows that you don't toss back a Deerfield red like water—and the rest of the room followed suit. They all sat for a moment with their heads bowed over their glasses, cups, and tankards.

As Justis sat down, he thought he heard Lindley add, low-voiced, "…and last Wizard of the Land."

THE KING AWOKE WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT something terrible had happened. Over and over he had dreamed it, that his heart was being pulled out of his body, the muscle stretched like a cord that must ultimately break. He cried out and woke—this time, not to more dreams of grief with men in long robes performing sad rituals in a strange tongue, but to a bright, clean room that smelt of salt and beeswax.

His body ached all over, with sharper pangs in his arms and at his ribs. He was terribly thirsty and the taste of something sweet was in his mouth. The ceiling flickered with a restless, rippling pattern of light, like the river reflections in a Riverside tavern. The room was rocking gently. Was he on a barge?

When he struggled upright, he discovered how weak he was—his muscles like water, his head swimming dizzily with each movement. But his heart was pulling him to the window, the pain of his desire more poignant than his bandaged wounds. Grimly, he pushed back the coverlet, swung his feet to the floor, and hauled himself, sweating, two steps to the tiny window and looked out.

They heard his cry up on the main deck.

The Land! The Land was nowhere in sight.

He was shouting now, holding on to the window like a prisoner in a cell. Sophia appeared and pulled him away from it, held him to her on the cabin

floor while he wept and ground his knuckles into the wool of her skirt. "Theron, hush, it's all right. It will be all right…"

"I'm bound to the Land," he cried. "You're killing me; take me back!"

She had wanted him to wake and to be strong, but this was closer to the madness of fever. "Theron, please, my darling, my child…look at me. Please. You are hurting yourself, my love, you must stop…"

It was her voice that soothed him, more than her words. He breathed deeply, as she told him to, and the pain receded to where he could bear it. He let her feed him a syrup that sent him back to sleep. When he woke again, he was less frightened, but sadder. His mother gave him honey to eat. "We are going back to Kyros," she smiled, "where you will find the honey is even sweeter than this. You will be well there, my son."

The ship sang in its ropes and sails the song the wind taught it. He heard men's voices, and women's, too, shouting orders and cursing and telling jokes and singing. His sister Jessica came in, sunbrowned and trousered. He clutched her callused hand. "Take me back, Jess. I need to go back."

"No, you don't," she said curtly. "Be still and listen, and I'll tell you why."

"You don't know—"

"I know more than you think. Much more, in fact. You told me things in the Folly, and you've said things when you're asleep. And I've been doing a little reading. So listen to me."

He lay back in the pillows. She sat on a stool beside the bunk and fixed him with her bright eyes.

"You need to be away," she told him. "You need to be washed clean. Some of what has happened to you will stay with you, and that's the good part, the true part, the part that should stay. Some of it will not stay: you'll forget, and it's just as well; that part's no good to you. You gave up a lot of your blood. You left it behind on the steps of the University; it's gone into the Land. What is new in you, you make yourself. That new blood is yours, to do what you want with, for now and always."

Her words quieted the panicked clamoring in his head. He had forgotten that his sister was famous for having sold ice to the frozen kingdom of Arkenvelt. But that was her gift.

"There are some things you need to think about," she went on. "Sophia will take care of you as long as you need her to. But if I were you, I'd try to

be useful. I'd try to gain strength and mastery. Take your time," she went on in a steady, soothing tone. "In a day or two, I'll have you carried up on deck. Can you still tie a half-hitch knot? I'll teach you others. And I'll teach you to navigate by the stars, and when you're feeling stronger, we'll make a sailor of you."

He was very nearly asleep, lulled by the promise of something new to learn. He did like knowing new things.

Softly, Jessica closed the cabin door. She took a small brown leather book out of her pocket, grinned at it, tucked it under her arm. Its gold leaf bore a bloody thumbprint, and it wasn't the first.

Dear Katherine, Jessica wrote that evening. *The voyage is well begun.*

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE EVENTS OF THIS NOVEL TAKE PLACE SOME SIXTY YEARS after those of Ellen's first novel, *Swordspoint*. Some of the intervening years are touched on in her short stories "The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death" and "The Death of the Duke" (in Datlow & Windling's *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* for 1991 and 1998).

Ellen can't thank Delia enough for agreeing to play in her sandbox, and for increasing the population and breadth of the city. Delia's story of the love of King Alexander for Fair Rosamund, "The Tragedy of King Alexander the Stag," was published in Colleen Doran's A Distant Soil #29 (Image Comics). Ellen is planning another novel set fifteen years after Swordspoint.

The Fall of the Kings is based on a novella of the same name, our first collaboration, published by Nicola Griffith and Stephen Pagel in their landmark anthology, *Bending the Landscape: Fantasy*. We thank them for their encouragement.

Both authors also thank the Somerville Genrettes—Laurie J. Marks, Rosemary Kirstein, and Didi Stewart—and all the other patient and creative souls who have read parts and versions of this work in manuscript over the years: Mimi Panitch, Patrick J. O'Connor, Sarah Smith, Kelly Link, Justine Larbalestier, Terri Windling, Anne Hudson, Paula Kate Marmor, Eve Sweetser, Alex Madonik, Shweta Narayan, Elizabeth Wein, and Deborah Manning. This book took a long time to write, so if we've lost some people's names along the march, we hope they'll forgive us and still accept our thanks. We do not forget our editor, Anne Lesley Groell, and our good agent and friend, Christopher Schelling.

In addition, Ellen is grateful to her *Sound & Spirit* colleagues at WGBH Radio—Jon Solins, Helen Harrington, Stephen Snyder, Jeff Nelson, Gary Mott, Titilayo Ngwenya, and Joellen Easton—for all their support and good work even when the host of the show was off in Riverside looking for action.

Delia thanks the staff and denizens of the Diesel Café in Davis Square, Somerville, for office space, salads, coffee, and occasionally, inspiration.

For those who, like us, grew up in the Land of Books and still claim citizenship in that country, the influence of other authors is abundant and bountiful. Here we would particularly like to acknowledge the work of the late Dorothy Dunnett, a great historical novelist who leaves her mark on a whole generation of writers, and Ronald Millar, whose play *Abelard and Heloise* each of us turns out to have gone with our mothers to see in London in the summer of 1970.

Ellen Kushner & Delia Sherman
Boston & NYC
March 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ellen Kushner's first novel was *Swordspoint, a Melodrama of Manners*. Her second novel, *Thomas the Rhymer*, won the Mythopoeic and the World Fantasy Awards. She has edited two fantasy anthologies, and her short fiction has appeared in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. In 1987 she left an editorial career in New York City to become a producer/announcer at WGBH Radio in Boston, where she created an eclectic variety of local and national programming. Since 1996 she has entertained and enlightened audiences across the country as the host and writer of PRI's award-winning national public radio program *Sound & Spirit* (www.wgbh.org/pri/spirit).

Kushner's performance pieces for stage and radio include *Esther: the Feast of Masks* and *The Golden Dreydl: a Klezmer 'Nutcracker'* (winner of the 2001 Gracie Allen award), which she performs with Shirim Klezmer Orchestra live and on CD. With *Sound & Spirit* she created the CD *Welcoming Children Into the World* (Rykodisc). She is a popular speaker at a variety of venues from synagogue pulpits to science fiction conventions.

In her spare time, she complains about not having any spare time. She is a good cook and a terrible housekeeper. She likes to sing.

Delia Sherman has spent much of her life at one end of a classroom or another, at Brown University where she earned a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies and at Boston University and Northeastern, where she taught Freshman Composition. Her first novel, *Through a Brazen Mirror*, was published as one of the prestigious Ace Fantasy Specials. *Publishers Weekly* called her second novel, *The Porcelain Dove*, "fantastic in every sense of the word." Her short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the anthologies *Xanadu II, The Armless Maiden*, and *Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears*, and the children's anthologies *A Wolf at the Door* and *The Green Man* as well as numerous volumes of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. She was nominated for the Campbell Award for Best New SF Writer of 1990, and won the Mythopoetic Award for Fantasy Fiction for *The Porcelain Dove*. She has twice served as a judge for the Crawford Award for Best First Fantasy Novel and is a member of the Motherboard of the James Tiptree Jr Award.

In 1995, Sherman exchanged academia for publishing, becoming a contributing editor for Tor Books and co-editing the fantasy anthology *The Horns of Elfland* (Roc) with Ellen Kushner and Don Keller, along with the latest of the Bordertown punk-elf anthologies with Terri Windling from Tor. She is working on an anthology of Interstitial Fiction with Heinz Insu Fenkl.

She loves gardening and researching in libraries, and prefers cafes to home for writing (they bring you things to eat and the phone's never for you) and traveling to staying put.

Delia Sherman and Ellen Kushner share homes in Boston, New York, Paris and Tucson. They are currently working on a musical theatre piece with New York composer Ben Moore, and on novels written by only one person. They have no cats, and enjoy travel. They are both active members of the Endicott Studio of Mythic Arts (*http://www.endicott-studio.com*). They have taught at the Clarion Writers' Workshop, the Odyssey Workshop, Cape Cod Writers' Center, and are founding members of the Interstitial Studies Institute at SUNY New Paltz.